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## The Disruption of Gender Norms in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*: A Feminist Literary Critique

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### Abstract

This paper presents a feminist literary analysis of Ursula K. Le Guin's 1985 work, *Always Coming Home*, focusing on its representations of gender and the challenges they pose to traditional gender norms. In depicting the Kesh, the novel portrays a futuristic egalitarian society in what was once Northern California, which exhibits alternative characteristics to those of contemporary gender dynamics. The analysis draws on Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity to examine how the Kesh society's fluid and non-binary gender expressions disrupt the traditionalist, normative male-female gender binary. It explores how the novel's depiction of gender-neutral roles and responsibilities within the Kesh community challenge stereotypical gender roles. It concentrates in particular on an analysis of the central character, Stone Telling.

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**Key Words:** Egalitarian society, Feminist analysis, Gender performativity, Non-binary gender, Ursula K. Le Guin

## تقويض المنظومة الجندرية في رواية "العودة إلى المنزل دائماً" لأورسولا لو غوين: قراءة نقدية نسوية

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### المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث تحليلاً نقدياً نسوياً لرواية "العودة إلى المنزل دائماً" (١٩٨٥) للكاتبة أورسولا ك. لو غوين، مستكشفاً كيفية تقويض النص للمفاهيم النمطية للنوع الاجتماعي. يتحقق البحث في تقدم الرواية تصوراً غير طبيعياً لمجتمع الكيش المستقبلي في شمال كاليفورنيا، حيث تتجلى رؤية متساوية مغايرة للأنماط الجندرية السائدة في المجتمعات المعاصرة والذي يُظهر خصائص بديلة عن ديناميكيات النوع الاجتماعي المعاصر. يعتمد طريقة البحث على نظرية جوديث بتلر في الأدائية الجندرية كإطار نظري لتحليل الكيفية التي يقوض بها مجتمع الكيش في الرواية، عبر ممارساته المرنة وغير الثنائية، مخالفاً للمنظومة الجندرية التقليدية القائمة على ثنائية الذكر والأنثى. كما يسلط البحث الضوء على تفكيك الرواية للأدوار النمطية الجندرية من خلال تقديم نموذج مجتمعي يتجاوز التقسيمات التقليدية للمسؤوليات والأدوار، متخذاً من شخصية "ستون تيلينغ" المحورية نموذجاً تحليلياً لهذا التجاوز.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المجتمع المتساوي، التحليل النسوي، الأدائية الجنسية، النوع الاجتماعي غير الثنائي، أورسولا ك. لو غوين

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

*Always Coming Home* is a novel of many layers that presents a varied landscape in which to explore gender roles and feminist analysis. The book combines elements of fiction, anthropology, and speculative storytelling to depict the Kesh, a future society set in what was once Northern California (Le Guin: 5). The Kesh society offers an alternative perspective on gender dynamics, challenging conventional gender norms and stereotypes.

This society is portrayed as egalitarian, where roles and responsibilities are not strictly divided based on gender. This civilization challenges traditional gender norms by depicting a society where both men and women engage in various activities without being confined by stereotypical gender roles (Le Guin: 12). Examples of gender-neutral roles and responsibilities within the Kesh community include shared childcare, participation in agricultural and craft-based activities, and the absence of a strict division of labour based on gender (Le Guin: 103).

Compared to contemporary society, the Kesh approach to gender presents a stark contrast, offering a vision of a more equitable and fluid gender dynamic (Le Guin: 89). Through the exploration of the Kesh society, *Always Coming Home* challenges readers to reconsider traditional gender norms and envision alternative social structures that promote greater gender equality.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Feminist literary criticism provides a valuable framework in which to engage with the novel's portrayal of gender and its challenge to patriarchal structures. This approach allows for an exploration of how Le Guin's construction of the Kesh society challenges traditional gender norms and opens up new possibilities for conceptualising gender identity and social relations. At the core of this analysis is Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity, which is directly relevant to the novel's representation of gender fluidity. The main premise of *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990), is the concept that gender is not an innate, essential quality, but rather a performative act that is continually reiterated through social and cultural practices (Butler, 1990: 25). Such a theoretical framework aligns closely with the novel's depiction of the Kesh's fluid and non-binary gender expressions, which disrupt the normative male-female gender binary.

Furthermore, a feminist literary analysis grounded in Butler's theories would explore how the Kesh's egalitarian approach to gender relations and the absence of rigid gender binaries prompt readers to critically reflect on the gender norms and power structures that

shape their own societal contexts (Le Guin: 143). This would involve examining how the novel's alternative vision of gender relations challenges the patriarchal structures that have historically dominated the genre of speculative fiction (Le Guin, 1985: 201).

By engaging with the Butlerian concepts of gender performativity and the subversion of normative gender constructs, a feminist literary analysis of *Always Coming Home* would offer a nuanced and theoretically informed interpretation of the novel's contribution to feminist discourse (Adams et al, 2012: 27). This approach would give clarity to how Le Guin's imagined society disrupts and reimagines the gender-based assumptions and power dynamics that have long shaped both the genre of speculative fiction and the broader societal contexts in which readers are situated.

### **3. OVERVIEW OF BUTLER'S THEORY**

Feminist literary criticism must first be grounded in some understanding of gender. Butler seeks to rethink the categories of feminism that had been unthinkingly inherited from patriarchy. Feminism, she argues, reifies gender, turning it into an ontological category. Instead of assuming that we already know what women and men are, we should consider the means by which they are produced. In her earliest work, Butler draws inspiration for this claim from a foundational declaration that one is not born, but becomes a woman. As Butler explains, gender is not a thing—although it may appear that way—nor is it a kind of grand illusion to be challenged.

It is instead the activity of a subject, the performative production of the real in a process that is not necessarily complete. Importantly, Butler does not argue that the subject is separate from natural sex, but rather that it is through the maintenance of such a separation that the gendered subject is produced. Even at birth, as the doctor declares, "It's a boy!" and the infant in the primary sense becomes male, the greater distributive process of its gendered subjectivity begins. There are innumerable social practices that surround the infant and the infant's sex, and it is through these that the natural sex of the infant is assigned the meaning of a gender. Those we call "transsexual" demonstrate that natural sex is as inextricably tied to gender, as some have long claimed. What amounts to sex reassignment is not limited to the surgical operation. For years, it requires heavy doses of administrative, professional, and psychological sex guidance.

### **4. DISRUPTION OF GENDER NORMS IN KESH SOCIETY**

The native society of *Always Coming Home* is characterized by the disruption and disregard of gender norms. Men and women are both valued equally and are both

expected to contribute to the community. The division of work and roles within society is not based on gender but instead is based only on the skills and abilities of the person. This concept partially follows the early ideas of pioneer feminists' androgynism. If both genders take part equally in both their feminine and masculine sides, women are no longer suppressed by the masculine characteristics of the dominant figures, and the suppression of the masculine side of men will no longer carry the suppression of the female figure. Also, the organization of society based only on qualities is the community in which women and children in general are included and loved to be active parts and don't suffer the need to prove their talent or abilities.

There is a way of a freer, more harmonic childhood in which human communities are raised by the principles of the society of the mother of origin: the recovery of the values repressed by complex and manifold contemporary societies.

#### **4.1 The Disruption of Gender Norms**

One key aspect to explore in the present study would be the ways in which the Kesh society's gender fluidity and egalitarian structures intersect with the representation of other social identities within the imagined world. For instance, the novel's portrayal of the Kesh's diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, as well as its depiction of various socioeconomic classes, shows how these intersecting identity markers shape the characters' experiences and challenge or reinforce certain power dynamics. Such a depiction is illustrated by the following quotation below:

"Obsidian of the Obsidian said, "Why are these Condor people all men? Where are the Condor women? Are they ginkgos? \* Let them marry each other and breed whatever they like. Let this daughter of our House not take a man of no House! ... The ginkgo tree is sexually dimorphic. Female trees are not usually planted near male trees, lest they be fertilised, since the fruit exudes a terrific stench. In Kesh literature the ginkgo is associated with homosexuality both in satire and in celebration." (Le Guin: 53)

The key point is that Le Guin has used the ginkgo tree as a means of showing how in the Kesh world, people are free to couple or marry as they please. While some may condemn non-binary relationships, such as Obsidian above, his is only one of a spectrum of views. The tree has connotations of satire as well as happiness, meaning that other "non-traditional" views on relationships are equally valid and even celebrated without prejudice.

Zaki (1990: 310) views the novel as important in the portrayal of non-binary identities and relationships, as well as its acknowledgment of disability and bodily diversity, further

complicating and expanding the feminist critique of gender norms (Le Guin: 91). This approach highlights the ways in which the Kesh society's alternative vision of gender relations is intertwined with its broader embrace of social and cultural pluralism.

#### **4.2 Analysis of Gender Roles and Power Dynamics**

Feminist critiques that deconstruct traditional gender roles in society often show these biases as having no 'real' basis; rather, power and politics, which are reflected physically and socially, are used as means to create a state built upon such biases. The aim of this paper being to analyse whether the social norms of gender and sex are negated in the imagined society of *Always Coming Home*, analysis was done through the perspective of both feminist literary theory and other texts that have made use of similar themes created within the gender power continuum to further discuss if these norm disruptors, once internalized in more bodies, can lead to the creation of more inclusive identities and genders in the hands of the reader. What would the reader's own unique systems to transition through space and time look like? When applying the notion of the 'other' and structures of dominance, one can make use of this academic approach to better distinguish how these shapes are used to create internal rules about what one can and cannot expect from a specific person. This intriguing 'normalized' other often stems from the social constraints of the 'core value' created by a culture or society. In the world Le Guin creates in *Always Coming Home*, the dominant archetypes of 'agent' and 'victim' are disintegrated and represented through a never-ending cycle of change and transformation. As an example of how this change is achieved, let us explore the Kesh's gender norms further alongside expected gender behaviour, and how it differs (or not) from their neighbours.

#### **4.3 Gender Norms Explored Through Narrative Techniques**

The gender norms and societal attitudes towards gender identity and expression within the Kesh society, as portrayed in *Always Coming Home*, stand in stark contrast to the more rigid and binary gender norms that often characterize contemporary Western societies. In the Kesh civilization, gender is understood as a fluid and expansive spectrum, rather than a strict binary division between male and female (Le Guin 1985: 89). This expansive conceptualization of gender allows for a greater diversity of gender expressions and identities to exist within the Kesh community, in contrast to the binary and often prescriptive gender norms that prevail in many Western contexts.

Le Guin's vision of gender is one of indeterminacy. Her novel subtly aids in creating notions of gender flexibility. It is not that full-throated aggressive feminism is present; its absence is compensated for by the novel's subtle lessened interest in the subjectivity of its female characters. It offers a subaltern voice in other spaces. Le Guin's science fiction novel is about the role of gender in performance in a utopian society, about ways in which humans attempt to shape the gender settings, through interpretive acts based on the minutiae of everyday life.

In *Always Coming Home*, this simplistic dualistic opposition is destroyed. The gender roles are expanded. To be male in the book is to be a collaborator with females, in all of their social, economic, sexual, and spiritual roles. The hope exists for all humans to move one step back from the brink of extinction. Women achieve and maintain influence, memory, and their places as the representatives of the way things were and should continue to be; men play profound, reverent roles in keeping it that way. The gender subversion helps maintain cultural continuity in Le Guin's society. The broadening of gender roles, the emphasis on spirituality and mysticism, and the abnegation of the personal ego break the literalness of the gender sign. Gender becomes less confining. *Always Coming Home* is a work of literature that shows the tension between the then and the now. It is a complex view of gender, the nexus of language and reality. Le Guin herself states when commenting on the novel:

The Kesh's egalitarian approach to gender roles and responsibilities is another key distinction from the gender-specific divisions of labor and rigid gender expectations that are often ingrained in Western societal structures (Le Guin 1985: 103). Within the Kesh, tasks and activities are not rigidly divided along gender lines, allowing individuals greater autonomy and flexibility in choosing their pursuits and contributions to the community.

Furthermore, the Kesh society's openness to diverse forms of intimacy and family structures, as exemplified by homosexual relationships, contrasts sharply with the heteronormative assumptions and limited recognition of queer identities and relationships that have historically dominated many Western cultural and legal frameworks:

Homosexual marriage was recognised, and homosexual spouses were distinguished, when such distinction was relevant, as *hanashe* and *hankeshe*, (living) in a man's or woman's manner. (Le Guin: 498)

The Kesh's progressive attitudes towards gender are thus also reflected in their acceptance of gender nonconformity, as seen in the experiences of characters like Willow, who embrace traditionally "masculine" pursuits despite societal expectations (Le

Guin, 1985: 52). This openness to gender diversity and self-expression stands in contrast to the often rigid and prescriptive gender norms that continue to shape contemporary Western societies.

*Always Coming Home* employs a diverse range of storytelling elements, including poems, myths, essays, and narratives, to enrich the exploration of gender themes within the novel (Le Guin 1985: 2). This multifaceted narrative style provides readers with a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the Kesh society's approach to gender, offering insights into the complexities involved in the construction and expression of identity within this imagined cultural context (Le Guin 1985: 29).

The speculative nature of the novel's setting and the imagined Kesh civilization allows Le Guin to challenge conventional societal norms related to gender and identity, inviting readers to question their own assumptions and preconceptions about these fundamental aspects of human experience (Le Guin 1985: 87). Clarke (2010: 76) believes that by presenting a world that departs from the gender binaries and hierarchies that often shape contemporary Western societies, Le Guin encourages her audience to envision alternative ways of conceptualizing and organizing social relations.

Butler (1990: 153) discusses future of Lesbianism as it may not represent a return to what is most important about being a woman; it does not consecrate femininity or signal a gynocentric world. She expects that Lesbianism is not the erotic consummation of a set of political beliefs (sexuality and belief are related in a much more complex fashion, and very often at odds with one another). Instead, the text asks, how do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis and how do certain sexual practices compel the question: "What is a woman, what is a man?" If gender is no longer to be understood as consolidated through normative sexuality, then "Is there a crisis of gender that is specific to queer contexts?"

Furthermore, the speculative and imaginative nature of the Kesh civilization, as depicted through Le Guin's narrative techniques, encourages readers to critically examine the gender norms and assumptions that shape their own lived experiences. The excerpt below illustrates the conflict between the past and a more egalitarian and futuristic approach. The doctor who was brought to examine and treat Stone Telling is clearly conflicted between the role and status of class, compared to a woman who is also of an upper class. She is however that – a woman – with female functions such as menstruation:

He was half respectful because I was a Condor's Daughter, and half jokingly contemptuous because I was a woman; and when he found that I was menstruating he became nervous and disgusted, as if I bore some dreadful infection. (Le Guin: 404)

Bardo (1993: 43) discusses the representation of the body – such as mentioned in the scene above with the doctor and menstruation – and feminist views in western culture in terms of power dynamics decades earlier.

By immersing themselves in an alternative cultural framework, readers are prompted to question the taken-for-granted notions of gender that often go unexamined in their own societal contexts. Through the innovative use of diverse narrative forms and the creation of a speculative cultural setting, *Always Coming Home* invites readers to engage with gender as a multifaceted and complex aspect of human identity and social organization, ultimately challenging them to envision more inclusive and equitable ways of conceptualizing and living gender.

## **5. ANALYSIS OF CENTRAL CHARACTER: STONE TELLING**

One of the central characters in the novel is Stone Telling, who serves as a vehicle through which the author examines societal norms, gender roles, and the complexities of identity (Le Guin 1985: 67). Stone Telling grapples with her place within the Kesh society, navigating between traditional gender expectations and her own desires for freedom and self-expression. Such an internal conflict is clearly illustrated by the quotation below, where Stone Telling is in the middle of discussions with others about marriage. Various of the other characters have suggestions and advice for her – some suggesting it is best to marry for reasons of increased social status, others saying that marriage is for love, with a third part of them saying that a young lady might only hope to be a "party wife" – a second one for enjoyment only, who would not have to pass money to the husband as a dowry but would also not be expected to have children and thus carry on her own bloodline. In the event, Stone Telling comes to the conclusion that among such conflicting opinions on marriage in that particular milieu (not all of them palatable), her own identity itself and self respect comes into question:

Having lived for a year with people who believed that animals and women were contemptible and unimportant, I had begun to feel that what I did was indeed unimportant and could not be mindful or worthy of respect. (Le Guin: 405)

Stone Telling's character represents the feminist themes of equality, autonomy, and the freedom to define oneself beyond societal constraints (Le Guin: 174). As she navigates the Kesh society, which is portrayed as more egalitarian and fluid in its approach to gender, Stone Telling's experiences highlight the tensions between individual identity and cultural expectations. Her story serves as a lens through which readers can explore the complexities of gender, power, and the pursuit of self-determination. Donawerth, (2000: 144) points out that women in the future and the coming generations create new voices

and velocities in the criticism of feminist science fiction. Through the character of Stone Telling, Le Guin deals with the nuances of gender identity and the ways in which individuals can challenge and transcend traditional gender norms. In the same vein, from a gender standpoint, Ermarth (1992: 89) critiques the crisis of representational time. Stone Telling's journey reflects the author's broader exploration of alternative social structures and the possibilities for more equitable and inclusive ways of organizing human societies:

One day when they were starting work on the bridge, my father taught me a word in his language, *pyez*, now: when he signalled I was to shout "Pyez!" as loud as I could, and the men working would drop the piledriver, a big stone in a pulley. I heard my high, thin voice and saw ten strong men obey it, over and over. So I felt the great energy of the power that originates in imbalance, whether the imbalance of a weighted pulley or a society. Being the driver not the pile, I thought it was fine." (Le Guin: 48)

The above quotation is key in the exploration of alternative social structures and ways of organizing human societies, because it shows how a young girl was well able to direct the masculine bridge-workers as if she were a man herself. She uses the same word – "pyez" – as her father, to the same effect. The original power imbalance resulted from the fact that her father was their boss, and indeed social superior; Stone Telling having occupied at that moment the same role played by her father meant that she was just as capable of acting in a man's place. This is a good illustration of the gender fluidity in that society. Furthermore, the weighted pulley is used as a metaphor for power imbalances in society, moving from the micro to the macro scale; from the particular to the general.

Stone Telling's character in Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* serves as a powerful challenge to traditional gender norms and expectations, even within the more egalitarian Kesh society. Throughout the novel, Stone Telling grapples with the tension between the Kesh's relatively fluid approach to gender and the persistent cultural expectations that still linger within her community. As a character, Stone Telling embodies the struggle to define herself beyond the constraints of societal gender roles and norms.

The Lamb Lodge women told me that we could not know the Warrior rites because the only suitable way for a woman to understand such mysteries was by loving, serving, and obeying the men who understood them." (Le Guin: 221)

Despite the Kesh's relative lack of strict gender divisions, Stone Telling faces pressure to conform to certain gendered behaviours and responsibilities. For example, she expresses a desire for greater freedom and autonomy that is sometimes at odds with the communal obligations and domestic duties typically associated with the feminine sphere in traditional societies. She is clearly confused:

The women smiled at me and tried to talk, but they were timid, and I was very tired and confused. I could not understand why they acted as if they were afraid of me. (Le Guin: 234)

Looking closely at Stone Telling serves as a powerful literary device through which Le Guin challenges readers to confront the limitations of traditional gender norms and to envision more expansive, inclusive, and liberatory ways of conceptualizing identity and social relations. Stone Telling's gender nonconformity in *Always Coming Home* is as a mirror to the Kesh society's relatively progressive and fluid attitudes towards gender identity, in contrast to the more rigid gender norms of contemporary Western societies.

The Kesh's conceptualization of gender allows for a greater diversity of gender expressions and identities to exist within their community. This openness is reflected in Stone Telling's experiences, as she navigates the cultural landscape and explores her own desires for autonomy and self-determination, which may not always align with conventional gender norms. For example, Stone Telling's interest in traditionally "masculine" pursuits, such as travel and adventure, challenges the stereotypical expectations of Kesh women as primarily domestic and community-oriented. Her willingness to question and resist these cultural pressures speaks to the Kesh society's relative acceptance of gender nonconformity and its recognition of the fluid nature of gender identity. This is illustrated below in a scene where her grandmother's views on traditional gender roles becomes apparent. That, in turn, exposes the traditional views held by the father of those below him and them in the social order, which manifests as a similar form of contempt:

My grandmother held her tongue, but she could not hide her contempt for a man who would not herd or farm or even chop wood. He, holding herders and farmers and woodcutters in contempt, found this hard to bear. (Le Guin: 47)

Stone Telling's journey therefore embodies the struggle against patriarchal structures and cultural constraints. To this extent, Johnson (2015: 497) and Kincaid (2012: 17) highlight the origins of genres and agree that Le Guin has come up with different representations of gender different from the traditional representations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* presents a multifaceted and nuanced exploration of gender, sexuality, and power within the imagined Kesh society, inviting a rich feminist and literary analysis. Through the application of Butler's theory, and an examination of the roles played by gender, race, class, sexuality, and other identity markers, the feminist analysis of the novel is further enriched, revealing the complex and layered ways in which the Kesh's egalitarian social structures challenge normative conceptions of identity and power dynamics.

In the final analysis, *Always Coming Home* stands as a powerful work of speculative fiction that encourages readers to expand their understanding of gender, sexuality, and social justice, contributing to ongoing conversations within feminist, queer, and intersectional theoretical frameworks. The novel's exploration of gender egalitarianism and the fluidity of social roles and relationships within the Kesh community reflects the broader feminist vision of dismantling patriarchal power structures and reimagining more equitable social arrangements, resonating with the work of influential feminist scholars. The novel's enduring relevance and impact within these theoretical frameworks further underscores its significance as a pioneering work of literary imagination.

The Kesh society's approach to gender in *Always Coming Home* presents a significant challenge to the Western conception of gender identity. In many cultures, gender identity is often viewed as a fixed, innate, and binary characteristic that is closely tied to one's biological sex. In contrast, the Kesh society depicted in the novel embraces a much more fluid and dynamic understanding of gender. Rather than adhering to a strict male-female binary, the Kesh societal structures and cultural norms allow for a wide range of gender expressions and identities to coexist.

This fluidity in gender performance and the blurring of traditional gender boundaries undermine the Western notion of gender identity as a fixed, essential characteristic that determines one's place within society. The Kesh model suggests that gender identity is not a static, predetermined quality but rather a fluid and mutable aspect of one's self-expression and social positioning.

Furthermore, the Kesh society's recognition and accommodation of individuals who do not fit neatly into the male-female binary challenges the Western assumption that gender identity must be clearly defined and aligned with one's biological sex. The character of Stone Telling, who grapples with their own gender identity within the Kesh community, represents a departure from the rigid gender categories that often dominate Western cultures.

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