

# JOURNAL OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PEER REVIEWED, INDEXED & REFEREED BI-ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

ISSN 0972-8309

<https://www.jndmeerut.org>

[Vol. 37, No. 2 (Winter), 2024]

<https://doi.org/10.62047/JND.2024.12.31.103>

## Androgynous Problems in Identity Formation: Quest for Healing in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

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### Abstract

*This paper discusses on the complexity of identity formation of the androgynous structure seen in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and it shows the healing power to free from the most problematic condition. Objective of preparing this paper is to explore the resistance and healing issues seen in the new scientific investigations of the Gethenian world. This paper is prepared in an alternative framework applying feminist theory as a methodological tool to dig out the causes and consequences of the modern practices of the identity formation in an androgynous society. It is analyzed through the lenses of Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. The paper shows Le Guin's subverting binary notion of gender-based issues. It presents the fluidity of Gethenian society as a gift of scientific discoveries. In Gethen, individuals embody both masculine and feminine roots during the kemmer cycle. Gender issues are socially constructed phenomenon rather than an innate characteristic. This paper exposes cultural tensions in addition to the shape and structure of the gender formation and it also empowers the healing traits. It shows the roots of identity formation conveying messages, and suggests the readers to rethink over their assumptions in a new way in relation to the new world and the scientific investigations.*

### Keywords

Androgyny, Heterosexual, Identity formation, Gethenian society, Kemmer cycle etc.

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**1. Introduction**

Minimizing the anatomy role, alternative mode of androgyny stands as a medium for change that functions as an output of the modern scientific investigation. It plays an active role to neutralize the gender-based debates about an identity formation and role play in the society. In this sense, androgyny can be seen as a space of resistance in itself that redefines the ways in which gender identity is formatted. Androgyny thus projects gendered rejection through the paternal prohibition of the mother that would constitute the female part of the biological development. Process of the gender determination and formation is irreducibly debatable as it moves around the different problematics of subject formation. The heterosexual difference located in the body as a discursive development structures masculine and feminine identities related with the biological construction. Discourses in the power dynamics has offered an alternative opposition that reinforces to change the constructivist position which we can find in this novel as a healing power for the women who suffer of the gender-based dominance and devalue of their works. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, thus, depicts a quest for an othered worldly race of anatomically neutral beings who take on male or female physical characteristics respectfully in an equal position. Le Guin's concern with gender formation and cultural biases is evident based that gives a lesson for protest and helps to heal out from the androgynous developments in the problems of identity formation.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Genly Ai; investigator, developer and envoy for the Ekumen, includes representatives from eighty-three planets in a new scientific Gethenian society. He persuades the local inhabitants to join under a chain. Ursula K. Le Guin meets him in the space travel as she writes about the new Scientific investigations of the Gethenian society. She writes, "Space travel is one of these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an

alternative biology; the future is another. The future, in fiction, is metaphor" (*The Left Hand of Darkness* 5). Le Guin perceives Genly Ai as an excellent mediator as he approaches the King of Karhide to unite the people and rule over them. Ai receives warm welcome as a member of the alternative society who reveals the reality of an androgynous society. Orgoreyn on the other hand is subsequently imprisoned and sent to a labor farm. Estraven comes to his rescue zone after his escape across the Gobrin Ice. The place is a vast uninhabited part that is totally covered with snow. The journey continues up to fifty days in a difficult situation of the starvation and exhaustion.

The journey is risky. Estraven exposes himself to the patrol and is nearly killed, while Ai escapes. The scientific investigators and the developers call his ship down to the planet and they go to get a welcome from the King of Karhide. Karhider is a kind-hearted King who provides a parental treat to the people and teaches his people to treat the others well, even to their children at home and the outside. There is no gender biasness in his Karhide kingdom and Gethen about which Orgoreyn narrates:

The parental instinct varies as widely on Gethen as anywhere. One can't generalize. I never saw a Karhider hit a child. I have seen one speak very angrily to a child. Their tenderness toward their children struck me as being profound, effective, and almost wholly unpossessive. Only in that unpossessiveness does it perhaps differ from what we call the "maternal" instinct. I suspect that the distinction between a paternal instinct and maternal instinct is scarcely worth making; the paternal instinct, the wish to protect, to further, is not a sex-linked characteristic. (*The Left Hand of Darkness* 51)

The King treats his people well with parental responsibilities and he teaches them to be soft corner in every steps of life. He welcomes the Ekumen delegation and other reports to make a change in the worldly practices. In the due time, myth like story is reported by Ai that incorporates the report of the field visit as an investigator, legend and story teller of the Gethenian society. He says, "Gethenians are yellow -brown or red-brown, generally but I had seen a good many as dark as myself" (21). Genly Ai as a scientific observer discusses about the color, structure and performances of the people.

Ai recollects the stories of pregnancy, child birth and the cultural construction of gender and its progress within the period of

twenty-six days. Ai, thus, does the classification more scientifically of an androgynous society in a scientific way as Judith Butler argues, “sex not only functions as a norm, but it is a part of a regulatory practice” (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* 27). Butler’s argument draws an attention in fallibility of the supposed neutrality observed phenomenon that is practices in the society. Butler’s concept helps to look at the society through inner eye that helps for gender equality and so androgynous society is imagined and set as an alternative place in Le Guin’s novel.

## **2. Critical Observations of the Narratives in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness***

Observing Le Guin’s narratives from an alternative perspective; it is not surprising that a male observer would see the Gethenians as male unless they are explicitly feminine and it is extremely telling that a female observer would work within the same set of assumptions. Stating the Gethenians as neither male nor female, Ai inscribes at the outset of the novel, “Truth is a matter of an imagination and it is implying in the universe” (*The Left Hand of Darkness* 12). The statement ultimately draws an attention of the readers during the course of the novel’s critique. Ai’s identification about an androgynous construction through an example of Estraven’s conversion consists of his own words, sharing the same “sex” with him (against all physical evidence), that relates the female scientist’s identification with masculine practices. The slippage from biological “truth” to gender construction is evident. Ai’s disrespect to the Gethenian society as an androgynous construction is a symbolic haunt regarding the cases of Ekumen benevolence that questions on identity formation. Feminists challenge the established root of the cultural imperialism based on the sameness of its patriarchal vision.

This challenge, however, is not limited to male, as Le Guin makes clear through her use of a female observer, Ong Tot Oppong, one of the earliest scientific authorities in Gethen. Oppong’s internalization of masculinist discourse in her field report is, therefore, ironic that questions to the biological construction. Opposing the male’s “neutral standard” is a case for Cixous’s “other bisexuality” (36). Thus, after her initial and brief caution, opposing male equally begins to project the androgynous males as apologizing factor of the gender debates. Le Guin’s use of the masculine utterances make confused to the readers as she says, “gender roles lead me

continually to forget the Karhidish, I am with-is not a man, but a manwoman” (95). She takes the man and manhood as a different entity. As a woman engaged in a scientific enterprise, her psychological identification with the “female” aspect of the androgynes must be suppressed in favour of the “neutral” discourse that helps for healing from the structured set of the gendered identification. The structured social pattern takes male as superior and female as an inferior being. The feminist insight in the modern time inspires women to resist the established norms of male dominance over the female body that is challenged in Le Guin’s narratives. She opposes the masculine practice through Estraven’s conversion and Ai’s exercises to challenge the social structure which relegates women’s position.

Le Guin creates the plots in an androgynous setting that confuses the readers to identify in between whether the character is male or female. Thus, the narratives in her novel arouse questions to the identification and social position of male and female, both, as they are changing and challenging in the Gethenian world. The pregnancy, child birth and an identity formation in a short period of twenty-six days of the kemmering process is questionable that how does the process complete its cycle. Gethenian’s sexual cycle lengths nearly for twenty-six days. Le Guin through Ekumen sees the absence of a continuous sexual drive in terms of social practices. Speculating on the experiences, sexual frustration in Gethenian society does not exist, since sexual desire disappears once in a kemmering cycle that is over in a certain period. Again, opposing the assumption, sublimation is possible only because of the male sex drive. She corrects herself a minute later, however, realizing, to some extent, the implications of her statement in doing so falls into a similar trap that she does not detect. It is assumed, “But of course they are not eunuchs, in somer, but rather more comparable to pre-adolescents: not castrate, but latent” (96). According to Oppong, therefore, it is the Ekumen who are the adults, whereas the androgynes, while in somer (which is four-fifths of their adult life), are the children. The scientific eye, however, is not satisfied with depicting the androgynes simply as emasculated males. The investigators are aware that the androgyne has another side, one that as in Irigaray’s formulation, resists the “representation of the self-same, the dark, obstructive and enigmatic soul” (19). The observation re-states to the dark part of femininity.

Le Guin dramatizes Kristeva's notion of the female imaginary as the repressed underside of Western masculinist discourses. Gender based discussion in the androgynous society haunts ideas of the perfect self-sufficient male criticisms. The politics of dominance and subordination require that the other be perceived this way. As a result, while in one breath insisting on the masculinity of the androgynes, the Ekumen observers paradoxically condemn, at the same time, the androgyne's femininity by extension of their own gender confusions. Ekumen and Ai's identity formation years are questionable as it is said, "Ekumen, which is a hundred light-years from border to border, will be patient with us a while" (*The Left Hand of Darkness* 12). The short term of life cycle in an androgyny of the Gethenians, consequently, is tainted as well by its association with the female body. Oppong's reference to kemmering cycle displays the traditional scientific abhorrence that remains trapped in the body politics of the patriarchal structure privileging the mind over body.

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* focuses to the Gethenian practices in relation to the human activities and kemmering cycle. She interrogates the system of dichotomies of masculinist versus feminists' relationships in regards to the self and the others that investigates upon the dark and light side of the life. She takes the world as a crucifer in the crossroad of the messages in short and writes, "Toward greatness, if you go more wisely than I went. Gentlemen I have been with the Envoy, I have seen his ship that crossed the void, and I know that he is truly and exactly a messenger from elsewhere than this earth" (46). Le Guin's narratives try to interlink the readers between the real world and an imaginary space of Gethen. The androgynous society in Gethenian world practices heterosexual activities in an amusing way that lasts within the short conversion and the kemmering period of only twenty-six days. An interesting narrative about Estraven's conversion, observation of the new world and the sexual experience is:

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. Thus, as I sipped my smoking sour beer I thought that at table Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it in fact perhaps this soft supple femininity had I disliked and disturbed in him? For it was impossible to think of him as a

woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture: in him, or in my own attitude towards him? His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man's voice, but scarcely a woman's voice either.....but what was it saying? I'm sorry, he was saying that I have had to forestall for so long this pleasure of having you in my house; and to that extent at least I'm glad there is no longer any question of patronage between us. (*The Left Hand of Darkness* 10)

The society perceives Estraven's conversion as the part of cultural and biological shocks in an androgyny construction. The novel compels readers to rethink how a biological development puzzles people and it sometimes raises the questions in the identity of the I ness and Younes. This paper critiques to the complex nature of androgyny construction. It interrogates factors related to the dichotomy of sex/gender and the development of the culture. The androgynous Gethenian Estraven displays that the achievement of individual integrity and humanity lies in coexistence of the opposites.

### 3. Theoretical Underpinnings

Ursula K. Le Guin is a feminist writer who promotes issues related to gender, identity, and social structure in a patriarchal society through her writings. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin critiques the social practices and challenges the rigidity of gender role perceived in contemporary society. The Gethenians' ambisexuality serves as a thoughtful experiment to explore the implications of a society where "gender is fluid and changes with sexual cycles" (Said 23). This setup allows Le Guin to question the stereotype limitations imposed by fixed gender roles. The novel also delves into cultural anthropology and sociology. It examines how gender impacts social structures, politics, and relationships by presenting a society where individuals are neither distinctly male nor female except during their sexual cycles, known as kemmering. Depicting a society without fixed gender identities, the novel challenges the cultural constructs of gender roles that define masculinity and femininity. The protagonist, Genly Ai, is a human envoy who struggles to understand and communicate with the Gethenians due to his own ingrained gender biases. His journey as

an investigative tool helps for the gender influence in interpersonal relationships in societal dynamics.

There are multiple reviewers and among them Martin Bickman critiques, “Le Guin exposes the blindness of scientific neutrality to its own cultural biases. Ai as anthropologist, observer, and envoy exemplifies the limitation of a discourse” (72). In this way, the Ai-created body used in Guian’s experimental narrative functions as a vehicle for illustrating traditional society’s perceptions and gender roles. He claims, “Guin reveals Ai for what he really is not a ‘neutral’ observer, but rather, he is a story teller, one that invents, and in inventing, reveals, not the other, but himself” (73). It suggests that portraying the feminine as benign or nurturing represents a positive shift from the traditional depiction of women as dangerous temptresses in science fiction. It reflects an evolution towards more nuanced and less negative portrayals of female characters in the society.

Martin Bickman in his research entitled “Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness: Form and Content*” explores, “The whole scheme of the work consisted in the opposition of the two worlds: the unreal world of books of chivalry, the ordinary everyday world of the seventeenth century” (45). In this regard, K. Le. Guian’s writing resists the conventional notion of gender identity by subverting gender through the representative character Genly Ai to show the real body narrative in modern society. Likewise, Kayla B. Stephenson, in his article entitled “One’s a Crowd: Gendered Language in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*” examines how the science-fiction novel deals with the idea that there is no such thing as a gender in traditional society. The role of domination and exploitation based on one’s gender subjectivity does not exist on the margins of society. He claims, “*The Left Hand of Darkness* was meant to be an exploration of society without gender constraints, yet the result still constraints to our perception of reproduction” (32). In this respect, women are critiquing their identity and position that existed in traditional society by writing and creating a new gender identity. It reveals the reality of Ursula’s writing that explores an imaginative society where the role of gender does not foreshow any individual in the name of sex.

Shu-yuan Chang, in his review article “A New Genesis: Rethinking Gender Expression in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*” presents the world from the perspective of heterosexual



identity. The homogeneous nature of man on the earth are falsifying the nature of domination, suppression, and social narrative. The writer creates a planet like earth to observe the reality of traditional society. Evidently, he contends, “Ai observes everything on Gethen from an Earth-like perspective; in other words, he tends to judge the society from a heterosexual perspective” (77). The statement reflects Genly Ai’s views regarding the sex centered disparities in Gethen and Ekumen society. It is clear how gender and identity shape the society from male perspective. He elaborates, “Eve is created in accordance with the image of submission and obedience. She is not allowed to be smarter or more brilliant than her male partner Adam. Accordingly, woman is considered inferior and is defined as the other to man” (2). This concept seems to be biased in the gender roles and it devalues women as inferior beings from the period of gods and goddesses. Eve is not allowed to make decisions by herself and stays under the “shadow of Adam” (Allen 21). After the distinctions in sex and gender expression between men and women are resolved. Women struggle to uncover their true selves beneath gender norms.

Virginia Kashyap in her article “*The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin as Feminist Fantasy Writing”, shows that there is no any fix gender in human life, this is only a perception of the society. She writes, “Humanlike creatures which are neither male nor female, with no sexual differences between the inhabitants, there can be no prejudice against the male or female. The prejudices that are present among the human can be seen from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through to this day, which includes women being labelled as the weaker gender” (4). This shows that society presents gender according to the environment in which they live. In Ursula’s work, the character Genly Ai is from earth, so he was surprised and got confused by seeing the Gethenian sexual cycle, kemmer.

Mascha Helene Lange in his article emphasizes, the reader attention to provoke the concept of male and female. It shows the concept of gender to widen in broad lenses. He writes, “*The Left Hand of Darkness* provokes readers to deliberate on the necessity of categories such as male and female, but it is not free from discourses that naturalize sex itself and needs to be read critically. A critical reading can be achieved, as explicated in this essay, through an intersex lens” (136). In this aspect, the novel also delves into the psychological and emotional aspects of gender fluidity, particularly through the relationship between the protagonist, Genly Ai, and the

Gethenian, Estravan. Their evolving bond highlights the potential energy for deeper connections when freed from conventional gender constraints practices of the society. William Sims Bainbridge publication of research title “Women in Science Fiction” claims that though traditionally science fiction, it was used to promote science and technology, women authors have chosen this genre to analyze current sex roles and advocate for change. He reveals, “Women authors have made science fiction a medium for analysis of current sex roles and for advocacy of change.”

Judith Butler’s principle theory on *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* critiques how power operates through established norms that control gender identities. It critiques patriarchal power structures by presenting a society where gender roles are not rigidly enforced. Butler states, “Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically incredible” (180). Butler’s statement redefines that the gender role is not inherently true or false, real or apparent, or original or derived. Instead, gender is a construct that can be questioned and deconstructed, revealing its fluid and arbitrary nature.

Like Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir argues that women have historically been seen as the “Other” in relation to men, defined in contrast to men and often oppressed as a result. As argued by them, in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Gethenians challenge this binary notion of gender by embodying both male and female characteristics. The concept of “Otherness” by presenting a society where gender is not defined in opposition to another gender exists fluidly within each individual. De Beauvoir claims, “What peculiarly signals the situation of woman is that she is free and autonomous being like all human creatures-nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other” (27). The book, *The Second Sex*, questions to the gender practices in the existed world and asserts, “It is a marginal world, on the edge. Out beyond it towards the South Orion Arm no world has been found where men live” (145). In this regard, the situation of women is marked by their inherent freedom and autonomy and so the androgynous setting of the society respects them. Despite this, societal structures force them to assume the status of “the Other,” in “contrast to men” (Acker 12). This illustrates how gender-based

hierarchies create a marginalized and secondary status for women. Gethenians' ability to shift between genders during kemmering process reflects this ambiguity, as individuals are not confined to fixed gender roles. Simone de Beauvoir's theory in *The Second Sex*, thus, critiques traditional concepts of gender identity. This theory excavates gender issues and challenges constructed setup within cultural and social contexts.

#### **4. Methodology**

This paper is prepared in qualitative research method and it is especially a library-based study. While preparing this paper, this researcher studies Ursula K. Le Guin's experimental novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* as a primary text and uses the reviews and criticisms as the secondary resources to critique the text in a context. It is analyzed in the framework of feminist theory. It examines the root cause of how Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* critiques conventional gender norms. Applying Judith Butler's theory of Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, this paper shows how Le Guin challenges readers to reconsider social constructions of gender identity as a healing power for the women. It explores the implications of these constructions for individual agency and societal structures. This methodology integrates theoretical frameworks to analyze how Le Guin's novel contributes to discussions about gender identity formation in the androgynous structure of the society. It offers new insights into the complexities of gender representation and critiques in speculative form.

#### **5. Results and Discussions**

This paper discussed on an issue of traditional practice of the masculine society and it brought a result that the gender biasness caused a major problem within the framework of gender equality, inclusive participation and the social changes. Gender discrimination and the social biasness invited androgynous practices of the Gethenian world that treats the people equally; they are neither male nor female at all. Socially established norms of the gender identities take "male as a superior being and the women as inferior" (Barrett 27). Feminist advocators oppose the views and speak for social reformation. This paper advocates against inequalities by subverting

gender roles made by authoritative male dominated social structure. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* reveals the overshadowed movements of the women that subverts gender concept and challenges the gender and cultural dominances. The concept is projected in this paper to make the women free from the pre-designed imprisonment. In patriarchy, males dominate females, and as a result, the patriarchal system maintains these dominations and normalizes them as everyday life practices and so an androgynous Gethenian world can be an alternative platform for them.

Dominant groups create certain narratives and regard them as real. Such narratives often elevate the status of men while depicting females as mean and dependent on men. These stories play a significant role in making these suppressions seem "final, fixed, and ultimate truths" (Bell & Daniel 23). To some extent, such narratives become researchable to biological science. In other words, these patriarchal stories define the female body as weaker and more helpless. Making these falsehoods irrevocable became the weapons for men to dominate women for a long time. Consequently, the establishes gender binaries: male and female ultimately play a crucial role in political and cultural power sharing exercises. Stereotyped social and cultural functions of gender roles fix females as other and different from males. This paper shows the possibility of dual gender roles that is known as an androgyny. In the present context, dominated females are searching for their identity and rights by subverting the preoccupied notions regarding gender and sexuality.

In Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, an exploration of gender roles transcends mere narrative as an alternative reading of the society that helps for healing from the conventional practices. Le Guin through the protagonist Genly Ai's journey and interactions with the Gethenians, navigates fluidity, ambiguity, and the arbitrary nature of gender distinctions. Le Guin's narrative technique, character development, and thematic exploration in this paper analyzes Guin's writing subverting the traditional gender roles. It challenges readers to envision a more egalitarian and liberated future that is to be learnt from an androgynous exercise. Examining the implications of Le Guin's literary choices within the context of her time and our contemporary understanding of gender, this paper seeks to illuminate the novel's enduring relevance in shaping androgynous discussions on gender politics and identity formation.

This paper, thus, explores innovative concepts of gender roles and identity. The study examines various scholarly perspectives on how Le Guin subverts traditional gender roles through the unique society of Gethen. She focuses on androgyny, cultural implications, and psychological dimensions. It envisions a new world of equality where gender roles are absent. Genly Ai also discusses the sharing of technology and the development of entrepreneurship. All the aspects of human life are “cumulative forces to understand and address the issues appropriately” (Bryson 53). In this way, this paper advocates against discrimination aligning with the expectations of the feminist movement. It projects a portrait of gender roles in social activities and suggests that they are not natural but they are constructed by the society.

Gethenian gender roles highlight an arbitrariness that challenges the wrongly constructed societal divisions. Social norms and rules are not fixed to one gender on Gethen and so androgynous cultural differences between the planets are vast. Genly’s culture is based on gender roles, while on Winter, there are no such roles as there is a certain kemmering period. There is no gender-based discrimination. Understanding and cognition about gender are beyond their concerns. All these aspects are based on performative discourse. Guin’s work encourages readers to reflect on their own perceptions of gender and consider alternative possibilities beyond binary definitions. Le Guin, thus, challenges the notion of established masculine setup and advocates for gender equality.

## **6. Conclusion**

*The Left Hand of Darkness* explores an androgynous problem and seeks the trail of an identity formation in the Gethenian world. Feminist critics critique the masculine practices of the traditional society and seek to escape from it for which androgynous structure of the modern scientific world can work as a healing power. Le Guin seeks for an alternative root that helps in healing from the existed values. An androgynous practice of the Gethenian world can be an alternative solution that treats the people equally by omitting the debate of male and female where in this world the people are neither completely male nor female as they can disguise, converse and participate in the kemmering process as Estraven does. This paper explores the problems of gendered treats and discusses to the issues of identity formation. Ursula K. Le Guin subverts gender identity

engaging with the concepts of intersectionality, materialist feminism, and feminist science fiction. This paper, thus, highlights an exploration of the gender formation and an identity creation within the power politics of the Gethenian world. Guin's novel is, therefore, gripping tale of political intrigue and adventure with a profound exploration of the human power in nature whether they are male or female. Androgynous practices of the Gethenian society provides energy to think in an alternative mode as a healing power to get rid from an existed problem of the masculine society.

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