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Воронешки државен универзитет Русија

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Трета меѓународна научна конференција

Третья международная научная конференция

Third International Scientific Conference

# ФИЛКО FILKO

ФИЛОЛОГИЈА, КУЛТУРА И ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ ФИЛОЛОГИЯ, КУЛЬТУРА И ОБРАЗОВАНИ PHILOLOGY, CULTURE AND EDUCATION

ЗБОРНИК НА ТРУДОВИ СБОРНИК СТАТЕЙ CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

26-27 априд 2018 / 26-27 апреля 2018 / 26-27 April 2018 Штип : Штип : Stip





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## YIN-YANG DUALISM IN GETHENIAN BIOLOGY AND POLITICS IN URSULA K. LE GUIN'S THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

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#### **Abstract**

Ursula K. Le Guin's relationship with Daoism is one of the most widely known, but at the same time least researched, aspects of her work. In her SF classic *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin takes dualism as her central theme, and the view of dualism expressed here is firmly grounded in Daoist philosophy and its theory of the dynamics of *yin* and *yang*. In order to shed light on this influence, the paper analyzes two aspects of dualism in the novel: the specific physiology of the people and the political balance of power on planet Gethen. The dynamic androgyny of the Gethenian race is examined as a fictional transposition of the mixing of *yin* and *yang* characteristic of Daoist internal alchemy. At the level of society, duality finds expression in the organization of and interaction patterns between Karhide and Orgoreyn, two Gethenian countries founded on the principle of *yin* and *yang* respectively. The analysis of biological and socio-political dynamics on Gethen thus provides an insight into the specificities of Le Guin's understanding of duality and reveals its deep Daoist roots.

**Key words:** Daoism, androgyny, society, balance

Dualism lies in the very foundation of the Chinese worldview. Originally, the concepts of *yang* and *yin* referred to the sunny and the shady side of a mountain, and then the meaning of the word *yang* expanded to everything connected to sunlight and light in general, and the meaning of *yin* to all that implied the absence of light, shadow, darkness. In *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, Fung Yu-Lan (1962: 25) charts the later course of the differentiation of meaning of the two concepts:

In later development, the Yang and the Yin came to be regarded as two cosmic principles or forces, respectively representing masculinity, activity, heat, brightness, dryness, hardness, etc., for the Yang, and femininity, passivity, cold, darkness, wetness, softness, etc., for the Yin. Through the interaction of these two primary principles, all phenomena of the universe are produced.

Radosav Pušić (2012: 115) explains the nature of the *vin* principle:

Yin is something 'whole,' 'perfect.' Yin always 'responds to the call,' in a very specific way yin is the echo of the actions undertaken by yang. Yin is something utterly 'static,' 'complete,' that does not contain the dynamics and action to which we are, ordinarily, used. Yin is serenity, peace, silence.

Yang, thus, 'carves' its activity in the perfect, completed vin. The Huainanzi says, "the Yang does to, the Yin is transformed by" (cited in Graham, 1986: 31). Yang impresses its shape in yin; yin is the climax and the beginning of yang. Yang is the destruction of the perfection of yin and, seemingly paradoxically, at the same time, its crown. Constant movement, endless mixing, eternal writing of cosmic patterns, implies perpetual creation and destruction, coming to life and dying out. Yin continually swallows yang, and yang sculpts itself in vin. The cycle of creation from the perfect nothing to the completed something is unstoppable as the complete something immediately turns into the pregnant nothing. The potential of the static irresistibly attracts yang to inscribe itself in it, to leave its trace. The static gravitates towards the active, activity climaxes in stability. We move to stop. In resting we plan movement. Yin thus may be seen as white and black, yang as the journey to and from. They are not static and separate forces (as they are often misconstrued in the West), but a relationship, a process, a continual flow, and there is no hierarchy between them – in a pattern, emptiness/background is as important as the markings.

As a novel which takes the complex relationship between duality and identity<sup>2</sup> as its central theme, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is Le Guin's most thorough exploration of the Daoist concepts of *yin* and *yang*. This paper focuses on two aspects of this relationship – the biological characteristics of the androgynous Gethenians and the political dichotomy of Karhide and Orgoreyn, two major countries on planet Gethen.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Thorough insight into the nature of the relationship of *yin* and *yang* casts doubt on Suvin's claim (1975: par. 12) that

the ambiguities never absent from [Ursula Le Guin's work] do not primarily flow from a static balancing of two yin-and-yang-type alternatives, two principles or opposites (light-darkness, male-female, etc.) [...], [and] the attempts to subsume her under Taoism (which has undoubtedly had an influence) are [...] doomed to failure.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Here, dualities, seemingly paradoxically, unite only through the preservation of their differences. In this connection, in his excellent analysis of the structure of the first novels of the Hainish Cycle, Rafail Nudelman (1975: par. 35) makes the observation that in Le Guin there is a

persistently recurring scheme, a specific "law of the Universe": fragmentation engendering an urge to union changes into a union engendering new fragmentation. The goal of the individual, the collective, and the rational world as a whole, is to attain a harmonious whole preserving the individuality of its component parts.

The physiology of the inhabitants of Gethen is one of the aspects of the novel that thematize the principle of the harmony of opposites. Unlike humans on other planets, Gethenians are not continually capable of sexual activity; instead, they have an oestrous period called *kemmer*. When they are not in kemmer, Gethenians are in *somer* – the period of sexual inactivity and androgyny. Thus, they are the embodiment of *one* which is *two*, of the balance of the active and the passive, the male and the female principle – an existence qualitatively different from the polarized nature of the rest of humankind.<sup>3</sup> Unlike people from the other planets of the Ekumen, who are in continual need of the other sex, their opposite pole, to be brought into balance, Gethenians exist in an autarchic harmony. Genli Ai, the envoy of the Ekumen – confederation of all inhabited worlds, explains to Estraven, a Gethenian, the parallel between the Daoist concept of *yin* and *yang* and the nature of the people on this planet:

On [a] blank leaf [...] I drew the double curve within the circle, and blacked the yin half of the symbol, then pushed it back to my companion. "Do you know that sign?"

He looked at it a long time with a strange look, but he said, "No."

"It's found on Earth, and on Hain-Davenant, and on Chiffewar. It is yin and yang. Light is the left hand of darkness... how did it go? Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one. A shadow on snow." (Le Guin, 1977: 320)

The concept of androgyny in *The Left Hand of Darkness* can and has been analyzed in terms of gender conventions, the psychological power of sexual determination, its social implications, and the stereotypes conjoined to biological facts, but Le Guin's experiment in the merging of sexes can also be viewed from the perspective of Daoist alchemy. In Daoist view, both the active and the passive principle are inherent in all human beings – within them, *yin* and *yang* flow, struggle, and stimulate each other in a specific dialectical relationship, now blending into *one*, now again separating into *two*. One of the aims of Daoist practice is the harmonization of this interplay with the principle of the *Dao*, which results in the attainment of a state of "dynamic identity" (Pušić, 2015: 154) in which opposites spontaneously engage in an eternal pulsation, a free and natural play perfectly in tune with the patterns of nature. In *The Left Hand of Darkness*, an allegorical representation of this process is discerned in the physiological fluctuations of the androgynous Gethenians,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> With her description of beings who personify the completeness and self-sufficiency of *two* united in *one*, Ursula Le Guin joins the rich tradition of literary, religious and mystical treatments of the motif of androgyny initiated by Plato's description in *Symposium* of the spherical androgynes who united the male and female sex in themselves, and reactualizes this topic:

Since the publication of Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969, a number of women writers have begun to work with the concept of androgyny, creating alternate worlds based on an image of unity in which "male" and "female" elements are poised in harmony within the individual and/or society. (Annas, 1978: par. 12)

who periodically acquire the male or the female sex, spend an amount of time as men or women, and then return into a sexless state, effortlessly, spontaneously, naturally.

In the same way as the opposing and complementary forces of *yin* and *yang* harmoniously mix within the individual, individuals establish a dynamic harmony of opposites in the relationships they build with others. In the Daoist joining of essences, the female, in itself both *yin* and *yang*, becomes *yin* in contact with the male; the male, in itself both *yin* and *yang*, becomes *yang*. And in a play-struggle of these fundamental principles, they attain a dynamic harmony and create a new unity. Gethenians, who are both *yin* and *yang*, are differentiated as one or the other sex in kemmer only *in contact with the other*, in a "mutual process of establishing sexuality and potency" (Le Guin, 1977: 118). When they establish sexuality, they form a harmonious whole of opposing principles with an oppositely sexed individual:

Gender, and potency, are not attained in isolation. A Gethenian in first-phase kemmer, if kept alone or with others not in kemmer, remains incapable of coitus. Yet the sexual impulse is tremendously strong in this phase, controlling the entire personality, subjecting all other drives to its imperative. When the individual finds a partner in kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated (most importantly by touch-secretion? scent?) until in one partner either a male or female hormonal dominance is established. The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies, and the partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role. (Le Guin, 1977: 118)<sup>4</sup>

The biological makeup of Gethenians gave rise to the "idea of the actual and necessary polarity of life [...] inherent to a Gethenian view of the world, to a Gethenian frame of mind" (Pérez, 2003: 24), on which the socio-political dynamics of the planet is founded. Gethen is home to two countries, Karhide and Orgoreyn. Orgoreyn has been cultivating a collectivist communist spirit for several centuries and is in a nation-state phase. The traditional form of government in Karhide counterbalances Orgoreyn's authoritarian regime and essentially follows the Daoist way: a great country has to be modest, the low conquers the high, the weak conquers the strong. While Orgoreyn has been building its state on repression, control and submission of individuals to the collective, Karhide, guided by wisdom or rather intuition, has remained a disunited irrational inefficient state with a mad king as its head.

Thus, until recently, Karhide and Orgoreyn coexisted in a sort of harmonious conjunction of opposites: Karhide was static and Orgoreyn progressive, Karhide irrational and Orgoreyn rational, Karhide passive and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The principle of the interplay of *yin* and *yang* is not limited to the human world, but represents a universal cosmic pattern. Thus Le Guin's descriptions of the sexual differentiation of Gethenians also evoke ancient Chinese cosmogonic notions of the emergence of *two* from *one* in the creation of the universe in which the chaotic unity of the original *qi* was disturbed and "the great one divided into Heaven and Earth, turned into yin and yang" (Lisevič, 2014: 38).

Orgorevn active, Karhide the cyclical and Orgorevn linear principle on Gethen. Differentiation, stratification and division are characteristic of Orgoreyn, as opposed to the chaotic homogeneity and equality of Karhide.<sup>5</sup> These differences are reflected in all spheres of life. Karhidish government is completely irrational – Genli Ai describes Karhide as "an incoherent land driven towards violence by a paranoid, pregnant king and an egomaniac Regent," whereas the Orgota government "believed in Order" (Le Guin, 1977: 144). The administrative apparatuses reflect this difference. The civil services of Orgoreyn employ an enormous number of people and require unbelievable quantities of documentation. Ai remarks that more people work in the Orgota embassy in Karhide ("armed with yards of soundtapes and records" /Le Guin, 1977: 131/) than in the headquarters of the Stabiles on Hain, where the work of the whole Ekumen is coordinated. Orgota civil servants are slow and thorough, as opposed to the "slapdash arrogance and sudden deviousness that marked Karhidish officialdom" (Le Guin, 1977: 131). Further, while in Karhide there are no regulations whatsoever about leaving the country, in Orgorevn even movement within the state is impossible without personal documents, and entering and exiting the country requires special permits.

Life in Orgoreyn, it seems to Genli Ai, has a bland, tasteless quality: it is not cold, food has no taste, people are pale "as if they did not have a shadow," as opposed to Karhide with its heavy, dark, oppressive shadows. Ai gets the following impression: "The Orgota seemed not an unfriendly people, but incurious; they were colorless, steady, subdued." On the other hand, Karhides are characterized by "color, choler, and passion" (Le Guin, 1977: 144).

Finally, the attitude towards the body is essentially different. In Karhide, kemmer (the periodical sexual differentiation) is natural, and "perverts," persons born with a surplus of one type of hormones, are not treated, but assume an important role in the spiritual life of their communities (similar to

Mishnory was cleaner, larger, lighter than Erhenrang, more open and imposing. Great buildings of yellowish-white stone dominated it, simple stately blocks all built to a pattern, housing the offices and services of the Commensal Government and also the major temples of the Yomesh cult, which is promulgated by the Commensality. There was no clutter and contortion, no sense of always being under the shadow of something high and gloomy, as in Erhenrang; everything was simple, grandly conceived, and orderly. (Le Guin, 1977: 145)

As for foreigners, the inhabitants of Karhide accept them gladly. The custom law requires Karhides to provide foreigners with food and lodging in their homes for three days, and in practice this period usually lasts much longer. In Orgoreyn, on the other hand, strangers are sent to commensal farms which very much resemble prisons or to voluntary farms which actually are prisons.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> We should always have in mind that "it is not a motionless balance, there being no such thing in life," as Ursula Le Guin points out in her essay "Is Gender Necessary?" (1993: 165).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> This difference is reflected in architecture and in the attitude towards foreigners as well. When it comes to the architectural styles:

the role of hermaphrodites in, for example, some Indian tribes – they contact the other world, they are marked, they become shamans). In Orgoreyn, kemmer is often controlled by medicines and perverts are treated.

By preserving its soft and dark *yin* nature, Karhide has preserved the balance of the whole planet – there has never been a war on Gethen, which the Ekumenical observers link to the Gethenian refined sense of harmonizing opposites conditioned by their dual nature.<sup>7</sup> But this is changing. The new government in Karhide has begun following in the *yang* footsteps of Orgoreyn and for the first time it seems that conditions for war will be created on this planet. If Karhide is caught in a struggle for continental supremacy, which it is actively working towards by claiming the territory of the Sinoth Valley, it will become a threat to Orgoreyn and two hard policies will confront in the first war on Gethen.<sup>8</sup> Estraven and Obsle, an Orgota commensal who understands the dangers of this situation, discuss the issue:

"Will the Great Continent hold two Orgoreyns?"

"Aye, aye, aye, the same thought," said Obsle, "the same thought: you planted it in my head a long time ago, Estraven, and I never can uproot it. Our shadow grows too long. It will cover Karhide too. A feud between two Clans, yes; a foray between two towns, yes; a border-dispute and a few barn-burnings and murders, yes; but a feud between two nations? a foray involving fifty million souls? O by Meshe's sweet milk, that's a picture that has set fire to my sleep, some nights, and made me get up sweating... We are not safe, we are not safe." (Le Guin, 1977: 111–112)

The game of power, of strengthening the hard without the cultivation of the soft and without the careful preservation of Laozi's three treasures (compassion, moderation and humility), can easily get out of control and lead to unpredictable and far-reaching consequences. Estraven insists on giving in in this quarrel in order to prevent the disturbance of the balance of the active and receptive principle on the planet.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Orgota statesman Obsle describes Estraven, Karhidish prime minister, as "shrewdly mad, wisely mad" and says "All Karhiders are insane" (Le Guin, 1977: 115). But this seeming madness is essential for the preservation of balance and peace. Balance, understood in the Daoist sense of a dynamic harmony of opposites, implies continual vigilance and readiness to adapt: if one side changes, the other has to adjust to the new situation. Of natural necessity, if rationality becomes pronounced, its opposite will compensate for the imbalance by becoming stronger too.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> In the *Dao De Jing*, Laozi warns:

Instead of love, one has only bravery;

Instead of moderation, one has only amplitude:

Instead of keeping behind, one goes ahead:

These lead to nothing but death. (*Tao Te Ching*, 1976: 82)

In order to cultivate courage, mercy must be nourished, to increase fortune frugality must be nurtured, to cultivate leadership modesty has to be preserved. If harmony is to be maintained, the importance of both members of the pair has to be understood and balance between opposites mindfully protected. One-sided development of what is perceived as positive and the attempt to suppress its counterpart which is seen as negative lead to chaos and instability.

Orgota commensals Yegey and Obsle understand the importance of balance and softness, and are trying hard to be the *yin* faction in their country and thus alleviate the one-sided, unbalanced direction of development in which it is heading. The struggle for prestige and disregard for the importance of the balance of power and weakness will jeopardize the planet and change it for good. Yegey and Estraven further consider this problem:

"[Tibe, the new Karhidish prime minister] feeds the Domination faction a challenge whenever they need one."

"And so strengthens Orgoreyn. But also Karhide. Every response you make to his provocations, every humiliation you inflict upon Karhide, every gain in your prestige, will serve to make Karhide stronger, until it is your equal—controlled all from one center as Orgoreyn is." (Le Guin, 1977: 112)

Their conversation expresses one of the key points of Daoist political thought which is hinged on the deep appreciation of the relationship between *yin* (weakness) and *yang* (strength), and might initially seem absurd or paradoxical to the Western mind. In chapter 69 of the *Dao De Jing*, Laozi says: "The expert in warfare says: Rather than dare make the attack, I'd take the attack; rather than dare advance an inch, I'd retreat a foot" and "When matched armies meet, the one who comes to grief is the true victor" (Lao Tzu, 1998: 89). Every victory makes the enemy stronger by motivating vengeance. For Laozi, the art of warfare reaches its highest point in preventing war; the art of government lies in understanding the preciousness of balance and peace, and in readiness for all their preservation requires, which includes the ability to deliberately lose a battle, privileges, or face.

In his anthology *Contemporaries of the Future*, Zoran Živković (1983: 414) writes:

Behind the multiple pairs of oppositions, on which the internal dynamics of this novel rests, there is no dialectical fusion of opposites, but their constant tense balance, in whose foundation it is not difficult to discern the influence of Daoist philosophy, with 'yin' and 'yang' as key categories.

Besides the biological nature of the androgynous Gethenians, in whose eternal pulsating the male and the female periodically emerge and then re-merge in the sexless *one*, and the political dichotomy of Karhide and Orgoreyn, which have been dealt with in this paper, the central idea of *two* which are *one* is weaved into other elements of the structure of *The Left Hand of Darkness* worthy of further examination, from the two Gethenian religions, the dark dualist Handara and the light monistic Yomesh, and the deep understanding and use of the dialectics of opposites in Handara itself, to the relationship between Genli Ai and Estraven in the novel's central plotline. The thematic focus on dualism is reflected in the form of the novel as well: Genli Ai and Estraven are two creators of the text: at the beginning, the two narrative voices take turns in describing different events, only to unite halfway through the novel, complementing each other's perspective in the descriptions of the same events. Finally, the very title of the novel points at the centrality of the theme of dualism, as the left hand of darkness proves to be – light.

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