

Social Construction Of Identity, Collective Self And Utopian Insight In Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia

Vishnukumar. E¹, Dr. A. Glory²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar Department of English Annamalai University
Chidambaram Tamil Nadu. vishnuelangovan@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor Department of English Government Arts College Coimbatore Tamil Nadu

This paper examines how the interplay of similarity and difference is also essential to the social construction of identity, collective self, and utopian insight in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. It focuses more on how social structures and cultural expectations impact the exercise of individual agency than it does on defining particularity through interaction with one's personal opposite. It is determined how identity, personal character, and society expectations are related. Shevek, a physicist, goes from the anarchist moon Anarres to the capitalist planet Urras in the novel, analysing the differences between the two civilisations and delving into issues of oppression, freedom, and what a real paradise may entail. Shevek's experiences on Urras, a world of luxury and poverty, political intrigue, and social stratification, are contrasted in the novel with his existence on Anarres, where uniformity can limit individual expression and the government is an anarcho-syndicalist collective. Through his search for intellectual freedom to express his ground-breaking thoughts, Shevek eventually gains a better grasp of both cultures.

Keywords: Individual, Utopia, Society, Identity, Science.

Introduction

Ursula K. Le Guin is one of the most influential authors of American literature. Her contributions to science fiction are distinctive in their concepts, possibilities, and alternative worldview. She is unquestionably a literary phenomenon because of her accomplishments. She is a cosmic being to the planet because of her simplicity and all-encompassing views on life and people. Her writing is renowned for its versatility. She has made such a significant contribution to fantasy and science fiction that fans will always remember her. By portraying an idealised world and moral principles for the benefit of all humanity, her writings transcend time and space and bring the entire cosmos together. As fantasy and science fiction gain more attention from literary scholars and critics, Le Guin draws a lot of their attention because she explores gender issues that make her fiction popular among feminist readers, she crafts

plausible worlds that shed light on enduring human issues, and she uses language with precision and impact.

In *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, the imaginary twin planets of Anarres and Urras serve as the setting. The two biggest rival states, A-IO and THU, rule the several states that make up Urras. THU, an authoritarian regime masquerading as a proletariat, is like the USSR, while A-IO is a capitalist society modelled after the US. Anarres, on the other hand, is anarchist and without a formal government. In essence, the novel examines how people behave, both when they are under the direction of a system and when they are left to their own devices. It is suggested that readers stand back and consider how their actions may have changed if they had been born on a different planet. Shevek, the main character, is forced to examine his own morals after realising that even seemingly neutral things like knowledge may have disastrous outcomes when exploited for political ends.

Le Guin employs the device of opposites in *The Dispossessed*, but she also establishes a dialogue between them through the activities of the scientist Shevek. Urras and Anarres, the two realms that serve as the novel's topos or topoi, are centred on one another. Genly Ai's most defining quote, "Truth is a matter of the imagination," is echoed in Tirin's conception of relativity (9). Politically speaking, Tirin's phrase alludes to Urras and Anarres' reliance on one another for self-definition. This is true both historically and spatially: Anarres is a society of anarchists who were banished from Urras after being executed there. Despite their mutual superiority and pretence of ideological and economic remoteness, the two planets support one another economically; Urras need Anarresti products, and Anarres needs Urrasti materials. By mandating that children "detest Urras, hate Urras, and fear Urras," socialisation on Anarres serves to further the ideology (43). The requirement for both planets to assert that their social systems are mutually exclusive serves as the foundation for these overtly political calls for distance and distinction.

The Dispossessed aims to support Tirin's viewpoint by demonstrating that Anarres and Urras are not only adjacent but also interdependent, in contrary to this notion of distinction. Anarres, as a polis, can only understand itself if it recognises that it is not Urras and incorporates this self-definition into the educational framework itself. The notion of Otherness and separateness is more delicately expressed on Urras. When all Odonians are sent to another planet, the anarchist society is merely disregarded because it is not mentioned in the history of the world. The relationship that has resulted from mutual isolation is the antithesis of colonialism. The two communities reject communication on the grounds that they are physically and even cosmologically distinct, rather than because of an overabundance of intimacy brought about by one society's encroachment into the other. *The Dispossessed* demonstrates that the link between Anarres and Urras is strengthened and reaffirmed by a strong assertion of difference. When Estraven states, "To oppose something is to maintain it," (132) he emphasises this deconstructivist idea.

Compared to most previous utopian fantasies, *The Dispossessed* makes clearer the relationship of dependency between utopia and its parent society, which upholds the power of social critique. The Anarresti are descended from Urras exiles who were banished to a mining planet as migrant labourers due to their support for Odonian anarchism. Furthermore, because the chapters' settings shift between the two planets, the connection is structurally ingrained in the story. Urras and Anarres are tightly bound together by interplanetary gravity, history,

ideology, and narrative. In fact, Le Guin's narrative structure gives the unsettling sub-textual sensation that the planets, not the protagonist, are speaking, even though the two planets are depicted from Shevek's point of view. Anarres and Urras have been compared to earthly political systems by several commentators. For instance, Suvin persuasively argues that the two planets have comparable referents in the empirical environment by analysing their names. This could not coexist as both required the destruction of the other to survive, as seen in the exaggerated depiction of communal interest on Anarres versus capitalist self-interest on Urras, which is reminiscent of the modern perception of America and Russia as adversaries. One may undoubtedly take Anarres as a revisionist reinterpretation of the Soviet Union as the scapegoat and Urras as a critique of materialistic America.

According to a different reading that emphasises the text's analogous aspects, both cultures are mirror images of the author's actual surroundings. According to this interpretation, Urras is a parody of consumer culture, emphasising its flaws and injustices such as intense rivalry, possessiveness, and interpersonal isolation. Since almost all its qualities are precisely the cures for Urrasti social evils, Anarres would seem to be the creative manifestation of a utopian desire to better that civilisation.

The Dispossessed is a symbol of power that is determined by economic factors. The structural clue to the current power elite in American society, as written after World War II, is found in the economic order, which is simultaneously a private-company economy and a permanent-war economy. More than ten years later, and in part because of his anger about the Vietnam War, Berke makes a similar statement in a little more informal way: The only reason the United States exists is to instigate, develop, supply, support, and take part in war, wherever it may be waged.

The Urrasti method of economic governance is clearly recalled by these expressions. The fact that the state of A-Io on Urras is continually at war with the state of Thu for control of the smaller, proletariat nation of Benbili - which is portrayed in language reminiscent of "Third World" states on Earth - gives the state momentum and ideological cohesion. This sanitised conflict, fought safely away from the people of A-Io and their potential viewpoints, provides a rationale for curfews and physical movement restrictions. Consistent with their tendency to be dishonest, the A-Io government and media make headlines about the war with Thu, but they fail to mention the silent class conflict between the bourgeois and proletariat in their own society. Word-of-mouth or the underground press are the only sources of information about this battle. The opposition between the government and trade unions in America in the 1950s and 1960s is recalled by the unwillingness to formally recognise the emerging labour movement and its demand for strike action.

The Dispossessed presents several viewpoints on Urrasti society, in line with Le Guin's emphasis on the relative nature of connections with political and cultural Others. The voice of Shevek, who views Urras through the eyes of an anarchist guest to whom capitalism and even free enterprise are unavoidably unacceptable, is the most frequently used. When Shevek repeatedly calls the Urrasti "propertarians" and "profiteers," he is speaking for the Anarresti viewpoint. Because he can observe what he does not understand - the twin predominance of profit and property - through the eyes of a stranger, these two features of the money system stand out to him the most. When property and profit - the means and the result

of production - go beyond measurable economic dimensions and have a psychological component, Shevek's interpretation of Urrasti society takes a Marxist turn.

The detachment from oneself and others that is a fundamental feature of capitalism is encapsulated by the combination of these terms with the Anarresti derogatory verb "egoize." The picture of the wall that Shevek uses to criticise Urrasti society, "And you the possessors are possessed," metaphorically evokes all these ideas. All of you are incarcerated. With a pile of their possessions, each person is isolated and alone. You die in prison and you live there. I can only see the wall, the wall, in your eyes! (192-93) Keng, the Terran envoy, offers a counterpoint to Shevek's uncharitable view of free enterprise on Urras. During their chat, Keng praises Urras while Shevek shows disdain for him.

Outrage over Stalin's atrocities and the Vietnam War contributed to a growing disenchantment with communist social institutions by the end of the 1960s. The flaws in a society built on admirable principles but devolving into a new system of censorship and state persecution are depicted in Le Guin's *Anarres*. Readers who had championed the ideal of shared property and mutual aid but had lost trust in the ability of economic or philosophical systems to establish a better system would find it appealing. On the surface, the anarchist society it depicts is a drastic break from the status quo. However, the opposite urge towards a conservative interpretation of societal potential and capacity is contained in Le Guin's radicalism.

A continuum of fictional representations of society can be constructed in terms of the politics of representation. In the 1960s, the American status quo would serve as a normative "middle ground" for representation. The conservative end of the spectrum would be occupied by more "realistic" depictions, while the radical end would be occupied by those that deviate from a realistic approach. On this spectrum, the twin planets of Urras and Anarres can also be positioned. One could argue that Urras, which is mostly represented by A-lo, has a more conservative relationship to the actual context of American culture in the 1960s. Anarres is at the extreme end of the spectrum since the social structure it represents is very different from twentieth-century America, in addition to the fact that the anarchist ideals it was founded upon are associated with political viewpoints that are typically found on the "left."

Therefore, it is astounding that Shevek, the main character of the novel, is honoured by two such disparate, even antagonistic, communities. Such unanticipated agreement over standards of excellence reflects common values. Le Guin's own ideals, which are reflected in the creation of Shevek and the twin worlds of which he is a citizen, can be recognised as the common ground. Shevek's origins diverge from the nuclear family, which is the most common socialisation pattern in western culture. He was reared in a community child-rearing enterprise, given a computer name, and trained not to "egoize" from an early age. The main inconsistency in his portrayal is that Shevek decides to pursue a career in temporal physics despite the socialisation process that is intended to shape him into a cooperative member of a society founded on Kropotkinian mutual aid. Bittner has eruditely examined his union of the simultaneity and sequence theories of time.

When interpreting Shevek's tabulation as having two voices, Le Guin's self-reflexive depiction of her research is especially relevant. However, as few of his Anarresti peers comprehend his area, let alone his theoretical approach to it, Shevek's job decision betrays a preference for solitude and against cooperation. As one could anticipate from his alternative,

de-familiarized upbringing, his characterisation is more in line with the prevailing model of liberal humanist individualism than it is with a deconstruction of that tradition.

Shevek's career indicates that he prefers individual exertion above group endeavour; he departs from the custom of teamwork that is accepted by society and other people's opinions. Shevek is a "egoizer," according to Anarresti, who puts his own interests ahead of the community's. He is an individualist in Urrasti terms, which are those of the symbolic code. Perceptively, Jose emphasises how the novel conforms to male heroism norms: Shevek, a man with euclidean reason and a European predisposition towards the promise of science and technology, dominates the story, which is nonetheless about a single person succeeding despite all circumstances.

The Dispossessed is distinctly European, masculine, and Euclidean. For both Anarres and Urras, the novel makes it painfully obvious that it is illegal to be different and to choose the road of Otherhood above conforming to the expectations of the societal "self." Because he is perceived as a traitor to the principles of Odonianism, Shevek is subjected to constant punishment for it, including being forced to leave his home planet. His "revolutionary" anarchist views infuriate the capitalist rulers on Urras, and when he is caught instigating a proletarian uprising, his life is in danger and he is forced to seek refuge in the Terran embassy. Shevek is presented as innocent of responsibility for his violations of social standards, even though both Anarresti and Urrasti societies value the views and concerns of the majority. The novel's narrator even gives him praise for it. He is shown using humanistic ideals like dignity, joy, family unity, and the capacity to arouse admiration, for instance, when he returns to Anarres after being expelled from Urras.

Individual freedom of choice is the foundation of Anarresti civilisation, yet as quickly becomes clear, reality falls a little short of this ideal. To assert and uphold individual autonomy, societal institutions are voluntarily formed federations that last for as long as the participants in them so choose, as opposed to stable supra-individual entities whose membership is decided and stability enforced by sanction. The Urrasti institution of "marriage," in which the union is "authorised and enforced by legal and economic sanctions," is clearly contrasted with the Anarresti attitude towards sexual partnerships (216), which serves as a prime illustration of this (16). The universal expectations for productive activity may be an even more striking example of Odonian social design's emphasis on individual autonomy, given the communistic nature of Anarresti society.

Like the structure of Anarresti culture, Shevek's beliefs and behaviour suggest a strong, albeit largely implicit, notion of the self as something that essentially makes choices. However, agency does not imply existential or psychological independence. Even while the self's existence as a unique entity that is different from everything else seems to depend on nothing else, identity - both psychologically and metaphysically, as diachronic identity - rests on interactions between the self and the non-self. Because agency requires diachronic identification, and because psychological identity plays a critical role in its exercise, the autonomy of the self as a whole - the distinct, temporally unified person who makes decisions - is doubly limited.

The vision of Urras and Anarres, as well as Shevek's response to the first woman and kids he encounters on Urras, provide indirect expression for it, which is nonetheless implicit. In their gravitational balance, Urras and Anarres define each other as both a planet and a moon;

their stark physical and social differences highlight each other's unique qualities, and in fact, they become reifications of each other in the eyes of their respective populations. Although these are planets rather than humans, the terminology used to describe Shevek's reaction to an Urrasti colleague's wife and kids implies that the planets' relationship of mutually defining difference also applies to people. Shevek welcomes the tension and allure of the sexual difference as well as the presence of children with relief after months of engaging exclusively with men. It does not seem reasonable that it is just a sexual reaction because his answer is the same in both situations. The narrator's reference to tension and attraction reproduces the opposed dynamics, the pulling together and pulling apart, that characterise all the images of differentiated unity discussed earlier and keeps Urras and Anarres in the relationship that defines them. Instead, he seems to be responding to the fact of difference, of contrast, welcoming it as an essential part of everyday existence. Shevek fulfils the Odonian adage that states: "true voyage is return" (76).

The Dispossessed mimics the Anarresti paradigm of human existence at the novel's conclusion and in its final decisions, giving priority to Shevek's identification with his anarchist brothers. The Anarresti have adopted a different type of social organisation, mutual aid, because of Odo's mistrust and denigration of "marriage and copulation," which she classifies as the primary Urrasti sexual institutions. Odo's denunciation is inconsistent because she was married herself, as Shevek points out. When it comes to sexual connections, The Dispossessed maintains these paradoxes. On the one hand, by reducing sex to factual copulation, the novel demystifies popular romantic myths about it and promotes greater sexual freedom. Conversely, Anarresti society encourages partnerships, which are viewed as a lifetime of sharing that including sexual faithfulness. Lefanu has written eloquently about Shevek's partner, Takver, saying, "Oh dear, Takver" (133). Takver's submissive role in her engagement with Shevek is a prime example of what can only be described as sexist inequality. The phrases used to build Shevek and Takver's link essentialise sexual relationships in a similar way. This exchange evokes the marriage ceremony through its symbolic, ceremonial, and even animistic register in the last statement.

Shevek and Takver act remarkably like a typical married pair, particularly when it comes to Takver's selfless support role. Takver's study on fish genetics, which is perhaps more significant as a potential food source that is not diminished by drought, is noted but not given any emphasis, but Shevek's studies on temporal physics are given priority. Takver, on the other hand, is portrayed in stereotypically feminine roles, such as being at home in the room she shares with Shevek, having children, and watching them. While Shevek's academic struggles and discoveries are faithfully documented, Takver's labour during their four years apart is merely glossed over as the narrative focusses more on her raising Sadik. She also reorganises her work schedule to fit Shevek's most productive hours. The Anarresti standard of equality between men and women in terms of their contribution and duty to the greater socius is inconsistent with the division of labour in marriage.

References

1. Bittner, James. *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*. Studies in Speculative Fiction. U of Michigan P, 1984.
2. Burns, Tony. *Political Theory, Science Fiction, and Utopian Literature: Ursula K. Le Guin*

- and *The Dispossessed*. Lexington, 2008.
3. Cummins Cogell, Elizabeth. "Taoist Configurations: *The Dispossessed*." Ursula K. Le Guin: *Voyager to Inner Lands and to Outer Space*. Kennikat Press, 1979. 153-79.
 4. Davis, Laurence, and Peter Stillman. *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*. Lexington, 2005.
 5. Le Guin, Ursula. *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. Harper & Row, 1974.
 6. Klarer, Mario. "Gender and the 'Simultaneity Principle': Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*." *Mosaic*, Vol.25, No.2, 1992, pp.107-21.
 7. Rodgers, Jennifer. "Fulfillment as a Function of Time, or the Ambiguous Process of Utopia." *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*. Lexington, 2005, pp.181-94.
 8. Sabia, Dan. "Individual and Community in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*." *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*. Lexington, 2005, pp.111-28.
 9. Tunick, Mark. "The Need for Walls: Privacy, Community, and Freedom in *The Dispossessed*." *The New Utopian Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed*. Lexington, 2005, pp.129-47.