Estetisk-filosofiska fakulteten

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Failed Feminism?
Ursula K. Le Guin’s Tehanu

Engelska
C-uppsats

Termin: Värterminen 2008
Handledare: Maria Holmgren Troy
Failed Feminism?: Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel *Tehanu*

The purpose of this essay is to show that Ursula K. LeGuin’s fantasy novel *Tehanu* instead of breaking away from traditional gender roles maintains them, despite the novel’s promises of change. I begin by showing the places where the possibilities of change are indicated, and then I use feminist criticism to show that there is no change in the gender roles.

I have examined the gender roles in *Tehanu*, by taking a closer look at the characters and the roles they have in the plot. Numerous critics claim that this novel is Le Guin’s attempt to revise her earlier, more traditional fantasy novels in the Earthsea trilogy, and that *Tehanu* works as a feminist reaction to the Earthsea trilogy. However, even though Le Guin makes the traditional patriarchal gender roles apparent to the unaware reader, the protagonists have internalised the patriarchal values of their society when the novel closes, which may be fairly disappointing to the reader who brings feminist awareness to the reading of novel. The women are depicted as caregivers, and the men are portrayed as the decision-makers. The gender roles are as traditional as they can be with Ged as the man who is capable to read the wizard’s books, with Tehanu who stays with her family and does not leave with the dragons, and with Tenar as the woman who takes care of the household.
Failed Feminism? Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel Tehanu

When Ursula K. Le Guin finished writing the Earthsea fantasy trilogy\(^1\) in the early seventies, “traditional definitions and values of masculinity and femininity were all in question” (Le Guin, “Earthsea Revisioned” 168). Le Guin writes in “Earthsea Revisioned” that she “wrestled with the angels of feminist consciousness” and that it took her sixteen years before she was able to write Tehanu with a feminist awareness that “revisioned” Earthsea (168-169).

Tehanu deals with the women’s situation in Gont. The women are men’s property, having the roles of wives, mothers and householders, and the only power they have is the one given to them by “the arrangement of mankind” (Tehanu 37). As the story begins, the protagonist Tenar has just become a widow after serving her farmer husband for twenty years. It was a relationship based on her husband Flint’s knowledge and Tenar’s ignorance, as she puts it; a way for her husband to maintain a poor, narrow sort of freedom and power. As we follow Tenar’s thoughts and actions, we learn that she is not pleased with the patriarchal arrangement of society and women’s limited freedom. As Perry Nodelman puts it, “the story centers on the awakening of her consciousness of the evil in the world, specifically the evil done to women by men” (198). Tenar is concerned because her society has become too dangerous for women to live in. They can no longer walk on safely on the road because of the gangs and thieves. No women or children are safe from men’s brutality. The reader begins to expect that Tenar will do something to change her situation.

Many possibilities open up as we read about Tenar’s past, and then she finds the little girl Tehanu, who has been treated terribly wrong by men, but has great magic powers. As Tenar takes Tehanu in as her ward to live in her house, the reader expects something extraordinary to happen, as the two female protagonists in the novel are depicted as strong independent characters. The two female protagonists are clearly unhappy with their lack of
influence which situates even the unaware reader in a “feminist reading position,” as Anne Cranny-Francis puts it (Cranny-Francis 79). However, if the reader is bringing feminist knowledge to the reading of the novel, he or she will be disappointed and that is the reason why I in this essay will show that Tehanu instead of breaking away from traditional gender roles maintains them, despite the novel’s promises of change. I will begin by showing the places where the possibilities of change are indicated, and then I will use feminist criticism to show that there is no change in the gender roles.

One factor promising change is the fact that the protagonist Tenar is depicted as a woman of power. There are numerous mentions of her earlier life which inform the reader about Tenar’s adventures in the previous novels. Tenar was taken from her parents as a child and was brought up by powerful women to be an untouched holy priestess in the Tombs of Atuan. She was selected to live amongst powerful women, and to become one of them. Moreover, in order to escape from the tombs she had to be very brave and strong to be able to kill her eunuch guardian, who was the person closest to her. Tenar’s escape is a sign of what she is able to do: In the past, when Tenar was not happy with her situation, she changed her destiny by escaping. It is also in the Tombs of Atuan that she meets Ged, the first man she has ever met, for the first time, and she leaves together with him.

Secondly, Tenar is seen as a hero by the people in Earthsea, since she and Ged succeeded in the quest of restoring the Ring of Erreth-Akbe, the ring which will help reinstate the new King on the throne in Havnor. As Tenar has never socialised with a man before, and Ged has no experience of women, they treat each other as equals, as they have no preconceptions of traditional gender roles. They help each other like partners, they save each other when they are lost in the Labyrinth and they work together when they retrieve the Ring of Erreth-Akbe. Tenar is depicted as a man’s equal or even as his superior. When she restored

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1 Tehanu is preceded by three novels about Earthsea; A Wizard of Earthsea, The Farthest Shore and The Tombs of Atuan.
the Ring of Erreth-Akbe and made it possible for the new age to come, she became highly respected by the King and his men, and also by the wizards. In this connection, Tenar is portrayed as if she alone could make men treat women better.

Moreover, as Ged believes that Tenar has powers of her own, he brings her to his old teacher Ogion in Re Albi. Ogion believes that Tenar has potential, and takes her in as her ward, and agrees to teach magic to a woman. It is unusual for a woman to be this close to a mage, but Tenar is a good friend of both her teacher Ogion and Ged, her companion on earlier quests. Tenar stays for five years in Ogion’s school of magic, before she decides to move to Gont as the wife of the wealthy farmer Flint. The people in the village know how unusual it is for a woman to be taught magic, and they are afraid of her at first. “[I]t was said that when she first came to Gont she had lived at Re Albi as a ward of the mage, and that she knew the Archmage of Roke, and no doubt had foreign and uncanny powers” (Tehanu 6). In Earthsea, only men are wizards. Women are witches with less power than men and they are only wanted for the lowliest jobs such as bone setting, mixing potions or healing minor diseases using their knowledge of herbs. Not even sorcerers, who are lower in status than mages, respect the witches, mostly because the witches are women. But Tenar has been an equal to two powerful men, and she has been given the power and knowledge of men by her teacher Ogion. “Men had given her power, men had shared their power with her” (Tehanu 37).

As a fourth sign of her possible power to make a change in Earthsea, Tenar also knows the dragons’ language as she speaks to the dragon Kalessin. It is said that it is only men, men who are wizards, who know the True Language of the Making, which is the language of the dragons. Wizards who can speak to dragons are also called Dragonlords and they are even higher up in the hierarchy than ordinary wizards. Not only does Tenar know the language; unlike men, she also has the courage to look into the dragon’s eyes and does so without
getting hurt. The skill of being able to speak and understand the language of the dragons should make Tenar a female dragonlord.

The fifth possibility of change is when this powerful woman meets the child Tehanu just after the young girl has been raped and thrown into the fire by a gang of thieves. Tenar nurses the girl, who manages to recover from the terrible assault, which has left half of her body deformed from being burned in the fire. When Tenar receives the message that her former teacher Ogion is on his deathbed, she brings the little girl when she visits him. Ogion discovers that Tehanu has been given great power at such a young age:

‘That one’, he [Ogion] said, ‘that one- they will fear her’. […]
‘Teach her, Tenar,’ he whispered. ‘Teach her all! Not Roke.
They are afraid – Why did I let you go? Why did you go?
To bring her here – too late?’ (Tehanu 25-26)

When Tenar asks the village witch to teach Tehanu, the witch answers that Tehanu is so powerful that she is beyond any teaching, by her or any of the witches or mages she has ever known. “Beware her, the day she finds her strength!” (Tehanu 203). The witch is bewildered by the fact that Tenar is not afraid of Tehanu, and that she is treating her like an ordinary child. So far, the reader knows that Tenar has accomplished great things and was considered to be so powerful that Ogion agreed to teach her magic. Moreover, she has taken in a little girl who is also considered to be possessing so much power that Ogion and others believe that people will fear her.

The final promise of change is given when a new archmage is needed in Gont since Ged has lost his magic powers in his latest quest, and Ogion has passed away. There is a new wind in Earthsea, and it is a wind of change. Ogion mentioned the change before he died, and Tenar is aware of the change as well. “Something is coming to be born - has been set free. I know in my sleep and my first waking, something is changed” (Tehanu 77). What Tenar refers to is the change of power in Earthsea. There is no archmage, and with that position
open, there is no one to keep the magic powers under control. The situation in Earthsea is chaotic; they have pirates ruling the sea, gangs of thieves, murderers and rapists ruling the streets and the wicked mages have come together with Aspen as the leader, ready to take control over Earthsea. There is a need for a shift of power in Earthsea.

As the story centers on this need and King Lebannon tells Tenar that in their search of a new archmage his Patterner had a vision and mentioned “a woman on Gont” (Tehanu 176), it is easy to assume that a shift from male power to female power will happen soon. With all the details laid out about Tenar’s and Tehanu’s power, it appears likely that the injustice has come to an end and the women will be men’s equals as from now on it seems that they can be archmages. The possibilities of breaking away from traditional gender roles with their traditional plot where “women are seen in relation to heroes: as mother, wife, seducer, beloved, victim, or rescuable maiden”, are endless; still the plot in Tehanu ends up maintaining these gender roles (Le Guin, “Earthsea Revisioned” 163).

In fact, the traditional gender roles are upheld even though the author claims that she wrote the fourth Earthsea novel Tehanu with a newfound feminist awareness and a different point of view: “Now instead of using the pseudo-genderless male viewpoint of the heroic tradition, the world is seen through a woman’s eyes” (Le Guin, Earthsea Revisioned 168-169). The world in Tehanu might be seen through a woman’s eyes, but it is ruled by men. Laura Comoletti and Michael Drout, in “How They Do Things with Words: Language, Power, Gender, and the Priestly Wizards of Ursula K Le Guin’s Earthsea Books”, recognise Le Guin’s realization of the transformed power of women. “[I]n Tehanu Le Guin has in fact found ways to assert the power and importance of women without overturning the logical structure of the secondary world she has created” (Comoletti and Drout 113). The logical structure of the secondary world Le Guin has created is that men have the power.
The men in *Tehanu* have the power of performing magic, to inherit property, to get an education and of ruling households. "Both manhood and magery are built on one rock: power belongs to men" (*Tehanu* 246). Neither the King nor his men are able to acknowledge that a woman could be the new archmage of Earthsea so they try to guess in what way “a woman on Gont” possibly could be connected to an archmage. They even doubt that there is a woman who has anything to do with being the new archmage. “Evidently this woman is to guide us, show us the way, somehow, to our archmage” (*Tehanu* 177). Tenar knows better though, and she is trying to make them listen to her, explaining the possibility of them seeking an actual woman. Nonetheless, even though Tenar suggests that the new archmage might possibly be a woman, no one listens.

The world is indeed turned over in Tenar’s head as she begins to realize that she is treated as an inferior by men, but she is so used to it that it sometimes seems comforting to her. Tenar was not comfortable when she was a student in Ogion’s house because she felt that she did not belong, that she was set apart and above the other women. She was confused because she was a woman like the other women, but still not a happy woman as she was so different from them and was not accepted as a friend in the village (Le Guin 37). Lois Tyson writes about how patriarchal ideology influences people to preserve the traditional gender roles by condemning behavior that a patriarchal society finds unsuitable. It is society which forms people’s values of what it is to be a man or a woman, and it is the traditional gender roles of a patriarchal society that limit women (Tyson 84). In *Tehanu*, the other women have difficulty accepting Tenar because they view her in the light of the patriarchal ideology they all have internalized. Even Tenar herself had difficulty accepting her role as Ogion’s ward and being a woman at the same time, so she gave up magic. She left Re Albi to become a wife and a mother, a path that is easier to walk for a woman living in a patriarchal society. Cranny-Francis explains that the situation, when the female protagonist is “actively prevented from
becoming exceptional, accomplished, or heroic” in a patriarchal society, and she mentions that this “is most commonly represented fictionally by the emotional fulfillment of the heroine who accepts a subordinate or somehow circumscribed role […]” (Cranny-Francis 84). Tenar settles for the role of the traditional woman.

The most important role Tenar has in Tehanu is that of a nurturer. She is pictured as a caregiver throughout the whole novel: “A wife, a farmer’s wife, a mother, a householder, undertaking the power that a woman was born to, the authority allotted her by the arrangement of mankind” (Tehanu 37). She took care of the household when she was married to Flint for twenty years and she has raised their two children. She takes care of Tehanu when she is injured, and later she regrets that she did not go to Re Albi earlier, to take care of Ogion when he was old and sick. She nurses Ged when he turns up at Ogion’s house injured, and at the end she nurses Moss when she becomes sick from the spell Aspen puts on her. So, even though Tenar is a woman with extensive education, who has performed heroic deeds, she spends most of her time being a nurse, looking after other people. More importantly, she devalues all of her power that does not have to do with what is seen as a woman’s role. “She thought about how it was to have been a woman in the prime of life, with children and a man, and then to lose all that, becoming old and a widow, powerless” (Tehanu 105). Tenar considers life to be without meaning if she is not part of a family, if she is not a man’s wife, doing a woman’s job raising children. Peter Hollindale observes that “In Tehanu we find that she did not use her freedom to usurp the male domain, but abandoned her (revolutionary) studies with Ogion and freely chose instead to live a woman’s traditional life as wife, mother, housekeeper. Her life has been unusual only in that she chose it” (186). Whether Tenar has chosen “freely to live a woman’s traditional life as wife, mother, housekeeper” is uncertain as she might have felt compelled to do so to fit in the narrow-minded society she lives in. In fact, the only contribution Tenar gives to the revolution in the gender order is when she rescues the
child Tehanu, and through that makes it possible for Tehanu to be the first female archmage in the future.

Accordingly, Tenar feels out of purpose when her husband Flint dies and her children are grown up. The life as she knows it is over, when she is nobody’s wife. However, she gets a new purpose when Ged arrives. Ged, who is the first man Tenar met twenty-five years ago, when she lived as a priestess in Atuan, has a special place in her heart. When he arrives on the back of the dragon Kallessin, she puts all her energy into nursing him, and as he slowly recovers under her careful watch, they behave like a married couple.

In fact, Tenar is going from one traditional relationship with Flint to another with Ged. Even though Ged participates in the household work, she has the responsibility for the house and the child. “[Ged] would come in late, cast himself down to sleep, and often be gone again before she and the child woke. She would leave him bread and meat to take with him” (Tehanu 84). As a man he is free to leave the house without giving any thought to making dinner or watching the child. When Tenar wants to leave the house, she must ask Ged if he can look after Tehanu so she can take a walk.

Tehanu has also internalized the traditional gender roles in their patriarchal culture because even though Tenar is the one raising her, teaching her the old songs and caring for her, it is Ged who is admired by the girl. Tehanu follows his every step: “Ged shouted suddenly, and with a leap he blocked the goat’s way, heading her directly to the open gate and Tenar’s arms. […] [Tehanu] was looking at Ged. She seldom looked at people, and very seldom at men, for longer than a glance; but she was gazing at him steadily, her head cocked like a sparrow. Was a hero being born?” (Tehanu 81). Tenar rescues her after she has been raped and thrown into the fire as a child, and all Ged, the powerless man, has to do is to catch a runaway goat, to be considered a hero. This is another illustration of men’s deeds being considered more important in a patriarchal society, whereas women’s tasks are performed
silently and are not praised in the same way. Le Guin comments on male heroes versus female heroines in “Earthsea Revisioned”: “Women may be good and brave, but with rare exceptions women are not heroes. They are sidekicks. […]” Like I mentioned before “women are seen in relation to heroes: as mother, wife, seducer, beloved, victim, or rescuable maiden” (Le Guin, “Earthsea Revisioned” 163). What is Tenar if not a sidekick? I claim that she is seen as a mother, wife, seducer, beloved, victim, or rescuable maiden, despite Le Guin’s newfound feminist awareness.

Tenar recognizes how limiting the traditional gender roles can be, but still she does nothing to change her situation. She is upset that a woman is not as appreciated as the men are and that she has no power except perhaps in her house, but even in her house she feels trapped:

She looked around the kitchen. ‘But the doors are shut,’ she said. ‘the doors are locked.’
‘Because you’re valuable.’
‘Oh, yes. We’re precious. So long as we’re powerless …’ (Tehanu 246)

Tyson writes that a woman who settles in the traditional role as a submissive wife “is rewarded for her ‘good’ behavior by being placed on a pedestal by patriarchal culture. To her are attributed all the virtues associated with patriarchal femininity and domesticity: she’s modest, unassuming, self-sacrificing, and nurturing” (Tyson 89). But Tyson also mentions the negative effects of being placed on a pedestal. A pedestal is not only small, leaving little room for anything but fulfilling the prescribed role, but it is also shaky, and easy to fall off. A woman who does not stay put on the pedestal, who parts from her prescribed role is often punished, for example, like Tenar is, when the other women in the village dislike her.

A woman’s reputation, and not her actions, education or magic power, is her wealth in the patriarchal framework of Tehanu. When Tenar stays in Ogion’s house she makes friends with the witch Moss. Moss, like other witches, helps the people in the village with some of
the less important jobs, and she lives by herself in a dirty house, under the same roof as her poultry. She does not live in celibacy, like male performers of magic must to keep their power intact. In fact, she had to leave her village because she was having a love affair with a rich farmer’s son against his family’s will. Since then she has only had casual sex with some of the men asking for her favours. Still, Moss is concerned about Tenar’s reputation as she lives under the same roof as Ged without being married to him. Moss thinks that the village people are going to gossip about them, and she reminds Tenar that a woman’s reputation is a woman’s value. Tenar says, “[A woman’s reputation is] Her wealth. Her treasure. Her hoard. Her value …” (Tehanu 123). In Le Guin’s novel, a woman’s value is not decided by her actions, her education, her magic power, her farm or her working skills. Her value is decided by her reputation, which is based on whether she agrees to have sex without being married, whether she gives her neighbours any reasons to doubt that she is behaving like a decent woman.

Tenar reasons like a traditional woman. She also thinks about how Tehanu will be able to fit into the village’s expectations of a decent woman and even considers the girl working as a weaver. “And people expected weavers to be a bit shy, often to be unmarried, shut away at their work as they were; yet they were respected” (Tehanu 129). It is clear that she reasons like a woman who has internalised the values of a patriarchal society, not like the ward of a wizard. Tehanu has been given great magic power and Tenar has been told to teach her magic, but even though she knows about Tehanu’s possibilities of being the first female archmage, she sees her future as a weaver.

Since Tenar does not think that she is able to teach Tehanu, the girl’s future education depends on whether Tenar can find someone else willing to teach Tehanu. Although the girl is considered possessing magic power, there are no magic schools that will teach her, because Tehanu belongs to the wrong sex. Women are denied education in the wizard school in Roke,
as a way of maintaining male monopoly at the power in Earthsea, and keeping women powerless.

Ged, on the other hand, is not used to being powerless. As he lost his magic power when he fought the evil mage that threatened the king, he feels very awkward, trying to live up to the role as a man without his magic power and strength. There are two ways for men to assert their power in Earthsea. One way is to be a sorcerer or a mage, and have magic power, which will give the man power over both male and female inhabitants and earn their respect. The other more traditional way is to rule the household, to make a good living, to be strong and masculine and have a feminine subordinate wife. Ged is only familiar with the magic strength, and that he has lost. When the king’s men come to Re Albi to look for Ged, he does not want to be found:

‘I can’t’, he said. ‘I can’t face them.’
‘Who?’
‘Men from him. From the king.’

His face had gone greyish, as he when he was first here, and he looked around for a place to hide. His terror was so urgent and undefended that she thought only how to spare him. (Tehanu 100-101)

Ged needs to find a new way of asserting his masculinity and again feel worthy before he can face the king’s men. Seeing Ged defenseless awakens Tenar’s maternal instincts, but she knows it is important not to pity him to help him save face, “She dared not touch him lest she worsen his humiliation by any semblance of pity” (Tehanu 101). The reason why Tenar feels compelled to save Ged from losing face is because he is not behaving according to the traditional male role. Ged and Tenar have both internalized the traditional gender roles in their patriarchal culture and they know that a man is supposed to be strong, not defenseless.

As Tyson explains, and we can see in Tehanu, the gender roles are very limiting, both for men and women, and the effect is devastating for those who do not fit in. Men are not supposed to show emotions like fear, pain or weakness, and a man is not allowed to fail in
anything, especially not failing to protect his family. It is considered feminine to show any of these emotions or behaviours, but if men do, they still have ways to increase their masculinity for example, by being more sexually active or increasing their manliness by showing anger (Tyson 86). As Ged has lived most of his life as a mage with magic powers, he feels lost in his new powerless role as he is not able to fit into the role of a strong masculine protector of his family. In Tehanu, male performers of magic do not engage in sexual activities for fear of losing some of their magic powers, so Ged is still a virgin throughout most of the novel. It is when Tenar introduces the traditional form of masculinity to Ged that he can settle into his new role. Peter Hollindale argues that Tenar is the “power behind the throne” when she is introducing Ged to male sexuality and love: “Instead of disempowered high status as the priestess of Atuan, she has empowered low status on Gont. There is nothing demeaning in Tenar’s several roles as a ‘power behind the throne’. She is ‘midwife’ to Ged’s anguished ordinariness; emasculated of his celibate wizardries, he is initiated by Tenar into male sexuality and love” (Hollindale 186).

Nevertheless, in Tehanu, when Ged is in the house, acting in the role of the protector, Tenar’s strength disappears. Even though Ged has lost his magic powers, he comes to Tenar’s rescue when she is threatened by the gang of thieves who hurt Tehanu. Ged, who has spent the summer recovering his self-esteem up in the mountain herding goats, arrives at just the right time to see the gang of thieves trying to break into Tenar’s house. Before Ged enters the house, Tenar acts confidently and is ready to defend Tehanu and herself with a knife: “The frozen terror that had bound her broke, and in rage she ran into the kitchen that was all red light in her eyes, grabbed up the long, sharp butcher knife from the block, flung back the door-bolt, and stood in the doorway. ‘Come on, then!’ she said” (Tehanu 210). Ged manages to pierce one of the men with a pitchfork and the others run away. In his company, she puts all her trust in him, no longer being an independent woman. “She felt all at once abysmally,
infinitely weary. She could scarcely hold the cup in her hand” (*Tehanu* 219). She has no need to think for herself anymore, when she has a man solving her problems. As Tyson points out: “Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (Tyson 83). In her relationship with Ged, Tenar gives up her former role as an independent woman to the traditional gender role where the inferior woman relies on the superior man. She relies on Ged making the decisions about the injured man from the gang that threatened Tehanu, and then she lets Ged lead her to the bedroom. By protecting his woman with simple muscle power and asserting his masculinity in the bedroom, Ged has found a new way of being a worthy man in a patriarchal society.

When Tenar’s son Spark arrives from the sea, she discovers that she has raised her son to be a sexist patriarchal man. As Spark was often sick as a child, Tenar was afraid she would lose him many times, and with him being the only boy, she attended to his every need. He did not have to help around the farm like his sister; instead he played by himself. Spark is used to being waited on by his mother and sister; therefore he sees himself as their superior, and he believes that his needs are more important than theirs. He does not appreciate women for the work they do for him because he finds it natural. Tenar asks Spark to clear the table after breakfast: “He stared a moment and said, ‘That’s women’s work’, putting on his cap. […] ‘Not mine’, he said flatly, and went out” (Le Guin 259). Spark has internalized patriarchal ideology since the day he was born. Tyson mentions that repressive agendas often pass themselves off as natural ways of seeing the world instead of presenting themselves as ideologies, hence the way of seeing male superiority as the way of nature rather than a product of cultural belief (Tyson 53). Spark’s sexist beliefs and behaviour are so natural to him that he truly believes women to be inferior to men, and that he is biologically superior. Tenar becomes miserable as she realizes that she has failed to raise her son to be an
unprejudiced man. With Spark in her house, Tenar has no place to hide from how women are treated in patriarchal Earthsea, so when she gets the word that Moss is sick, she is happy to leave for Re Albi together with Ged and Tehanu.

When Tenar flees from one prejudiced patriarchal man, she ends up in the arms of another. Tenar, who has been under a spell since she left Re Albi, leads them, against Tehanu’s will, straight to the evil mage Aspen. He does not like that the King and his men have a high opinion of her, a woman, so he needs to show her that he thoroughly disrespects her, to show her that he belongs to the superior sex. Aspen is very angry, both because Tenar is a respected woman and because the King and his men are looking for a woman to rule the people in Earthsea. Aspen, who is both a sexist patriarchal man and a wicked mage, uses both his male and magic powers to disgrace Tenar. He feels the need to humiliate Tenar and does so by forcing her to crawl in the dirt while he is mocking her, and calling her Lady Tenar of Atuan at the same time. Later he puts a leash around Tenar’s neck and makes Ged lead her like a pet, as if to mark how women are viewed in Earthsea. This is yet another example of male violence towards women that we can also see in the rape of Tehanu at the beginning of the novel. In trying to explain male violence against women in the world outside the novel, Sylvia Walby writes that in contrast to the belief that male violence is an act of a few men upon a few women, she believes that “male violence against women has all the characteristics one would expect of a social structure, and that it cannot be understood outside an analysis of patriarchal social structures” (Walby 128). In other words, because Earthsea is a patriarchal society, the rape of Tehanu and the way Aspen is abusing Tenar are natural ways for men to assert their power over women. By abusing, not all, but a few of the women, men frighten the other women into accepting their alleged inferiority.

At the end, the wicked male power seems to finally be broken by the new virtuous female power that belongs to Tehanu, the other female protagonist. She comes to the rescue
and calls for the dragon Kalessin, who kills the evil men, and saves Tenar and Ged from Aspen’s spell. Tehanu is not surprised to see the dragon, neither is she afraid. The dragon talks to Tehanu:

‘Shall we go there now?’ the child asked. ‘Where the others are, on the other wind?’
‘Would you leave these?’
‘No’, said the child. ‘Can they not come?’
‘They cannot come. Their life is here.’
‘I will stay with them,’ she said, with a little catch of breath.

Kalessin turned aside to give that immense furnace-blast of laughter or contempt or delight or anger- ‘Hah!’ Then, looking again at the child,
‘It is well. Thouh hast work to do here.’
“I know”, the child said. (*Tehanu* 277-278)

Tenar and Ged discover that Tehanu is half dragon, half Dragon Lord as she can speak the dragon language, and Kalessin calls her his child. Len Hatfield emphasizes that Le Guin has been able to unify the dragons with the women: “In *Tehanu*, for the first time in the series, the text explicitly connects the dragons and patriarchy’s hidden Other (the women), first in the old Dragon Woman whom Tenar recalls (13) and most powerfully in the child Tehanu at the novel’s end” (Hatfield 49). He states that “[…] *Tehanu* provides a powerful critique of […] repressive social patterns in its representations of the passing of the old order (in earlier novels about Earthsea) and advent of a new, more genuinely human one, particularly in the web of relations that encompass Tenar and those around her” (Hatfield 44). However, as I have shown, the “web of relations” between men and women and dragons and women that Hatfield is talking about never develops beyond the traditional gender roles, because Tehanu does not leave with the dragons as she feels compelled to stay and help her family. She too has internalised the patriarchal ideology and taken on the role of “the good girl” in terms of traditional gender roles. Cranny-Francis writes about feminist fantasy: “In this encounter [the meeting with the dragon] women as active subjects become perceptible, and the feminine construct of patriarchy, Woman, is revealed as a negotiation inimical to women as subjects.
Those who chose to converse with dragons are no longer doomed to spend their lives acting out the Draconic fantasies of patriarchy” (Cranny-Francis 77). However, as I have shown, in Tehanu the connection between the dragons and the women is not stronger than patriarchy, since the two protagonists choose to settle for a life as inferior women in a patriarchal society.

When the dragon has left and the spell is lifted, i.e. after they have been rescued, Ged takes the command and orders everybody around like the true head of the house. “[S]omeone must go down to Gont Port,’ Ged said, ‘for the wizard there. To look after Moss; she can be healed. And to go to the manor house. The old man will die now. The grandson might live, if the house is made clean…” (Tehanu 279). When they are at Moss’ place, Tenar nurses her sick friend while Ged sits down at her doorstep in the sun, resting. After she is done, she sits next to him, leaning her head against his shoulder, but still she cannot rest:

She was half—asleep when the child sat down beside her.

’Tehanu’, she murmured.

‘The little tree died’, the child said.

After a while Tenar’s weary, sleepy mind understood, and woke up enough to make a reply. (Tehanu 280)

Tenar is the mother and the wife, the responsibility of the child is hers, and she alone wakes up when Tehanu has questions, while Ged sleeps on.

The final failure to break out of traditional gender roles occurs at the very end of the novel, when we know that the spell is lifted. Tenar is thinking to herself that she has left Ogion’s magic books in her old house. “[S]he could send somebody for the books, if Ged wanted them. And for her spinning wheel!” (Tehanu 280-281). She was told by Ogion to teach Tehanu all; still she considers Ogion’s magic books to be Ged’s property and she settles for the spinning wheel being her destiny. “Traditionally, male maturity represents the freedom to wield power, female maturity a regressive acceptance of dependency and lack of power” (Nodelman 186). Ged has the freedom to wield power and Tenar seems to settle for the lack of power. She has no need for any magic power, because she relies on Ged. The gender roles
are traditional, with Ged as the man who is capable to read the wizard’s books and with Tenar as the woman who takes care of the household.

In conclusion, the logical structure of the secondary world Le Guin has created is that the men have the power and that they are still in power when the novel closes. Even though Le Guin claims that in writing Tehanu her visions have been revisioned, the novel maintains the traditional patriarchal gender roles, although they may have become apparent to the previously unaware reader. Tenar is described as a woman of power who has performed heroic deeds and been taught magic in earlier novels and she also speaks the language of the dragons, but in Tehanu, none of those qualities are significant since her most important role becomes that of a nurturer and a wife. Accordingly, because she has been nurtured by the patriarchal woman Tenar, Tehanu, who possesses so much power that people fear her and dragons come when she calls for them, prefers helping in the household instead of practising magic. The two female protagonists do possess a great deal of power, but they choose not to use it because they have internalised the patriarchal values of their society: a society with no place for women with power. Both of the female protagonists rely on Ged, especially Tenar, who acts increasingly as a weak woman when the relationship with Ged deepens. So, at the end the two female protagonists settle for a quiet family life with Ged as the traditional man of the house instead of practising magic or living with the dragons. The novel’s numerous promises of change are broken one by one, and the feminist reading position is undercut because the female protagonists have internalized the traditional gender roles in the patriarchal society of the Earthsea that Le Guin has created. Although it might raise the consciousness of an unaware reader in its portrayal of a patriarchal society, Tehanu fails to assert the power and importance of its female protagonists and the novel definitely fails to overturn the logical structure of patriarchy.
Works Cited

Primary Source:

Secondary sources:


