'MEN CANNOT LEAP THE GREAT GAPS, BUT IDEAS CAN': THE FAILURE OF THE 'ANSIBLE' DEVICE AS A COMMUNICATION CONCEPT TO ADDRESS CULTURAL DIFFERENCES WITHIN URSULA K. LE GUIN'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of the 'ansible', a transmission device coined by Ursula K. Le Guin and used by various characters across her collective science fiction works known as the 'Hainish Cycle'. The first novel in this canon, 'The Dispossessed', explores the novel's creation to allow instant communication between civilisations on different planets, as events within the novel lead to the creation of 'The League of All Worlds', which is a trade alliance made up of multiple nations across several planets, later renamed to Ekumen. Quicker communication using the ansible device does not solve cultural and societal misunderstandings between the different civilisations in Le Guin's novels, as prejudice and conflict are still present between members of the League. Comparing the concept of the ansible to other science-fiction communication concepts in Le Guin's novels, such as 'Mindspeech' featured in 'The Left Hand of Darkness', where speakers are unable to lie, questions the integrity of the ansible as a form of communication and the trustworthiness of those who use it. Several of Le Guin's protagonists are envoys or are employed by organisations like the 'League of All Worlds', who continue to face communication problems that the ansible fails to address. These include language barriers and translation difficulties within The Word for World is Forest, as well as misconceptions of gender and cultural behaviours within The Left Hand of Darkness. In conclusion, despite the invention of instant communication technology to unify nations, it fails to address many problems within the Hainish Cycle canon and leaves individuals vulnerable to isolation and prejudice.

INTRODUCTION

The use of advanced technology is a convention often found in science fiction to discuss social and cultural issues. Ursula K. Le Guin explores the interactions between civilisations in her collection of short stories and novels known as the Hainish Cycle. Her works do not have a chronology and are set on various planets connected by a trading organisation known as the 'League of All Worlds'. The ansible, a term coined by Le Guin, is a communication technology mentioned across multiple texts in the Hainish Cycle canon that allows the League to communicate instantly across planets, particularly to their envoys, who are often the protagonists of the novels. These envoys face various problems on unfamiliar planets, particularly assimilating themselves into foreign societies and communicating with their inhabitants. Robinson argues that the ansible is 'perhaps the most powerful image ever devised in SF for the unrestricted free exchange of ideas' (2021, p.60). The invention represents obtaining complete freedom of communication by removing time as a boundary. However, despite advancements in communication technology, it fails to address problems that risk occurring when communicating across communities, such as cultural differences. This is reflected within the conflicts of the Hainish Cycle canon, where cultural misunderstandings are exacerbated by the ansible, which, besides time, further removes the boundary of space between them.

SHEVEK'S INVENTION OF THE ANSIBLE

Le Guin expands upon the creation of the ansible in her novel, 'The Dispossessed'. The physicist protagonist, Shevek, attempts to invent time travel. Within the novel, the technology of his invention is of lesser importance than its status as a symbol of social advancement. Shevek describes the concept of the ansible as 'a device which will permit communication without any time interval within two points of space' (Le Guin, 2019a, p.283). While unable to move the user through space or time, between past and future, the ansible achieves Shevek's goal of distorting time by allowing instant communication. His invention fails to offer a means for individuals to travel through time. Nevertheless, it still succeeds in removing the barrier of time as an obstacle to communication. Messages typed using the ansible are received instantly, whereas previously, it took light years for envoys to travel and deliver these messages between planets. By removing the barrier of time, Shevek has completely revolutionised the concept of language and even political communication for society. The ansible further brings

communication instantly across vast interstitial distances. Le Guin's novel may open with a physical wall, but the dark chasms between the stars have always been a barrier more formidable and more absolute (Robinson et al., 1994). Space, as a barrier, limits contact with other communities and isolates them from finding cross-cultural similarities. Shevek recognises the invention's potential to remove these barriers, yet many of his peers see the political value of his invention by speeding up negotiations between other societies, 'It would make a league of worlds possible. A federation. We have been held apart by the years, the decades between leaving and arriving, between question and response. It's as if you've invented human speech!' (Le Guin, 2019a, p.283). While not outrightly stating the desire to colonise other planets, the emphasis on 'human speech' suggests a reluctance to learn more about foreign cultures and languages. Ekumen's desire to expand to other communities risks reducing society to one single way of life. Homi Bhabha challenges cultural homogeneity within 'The Location of Culture', 'We may begin by questioning that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion, the many as one, shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community, and by theorists who treat gender, class or race as social totalities that are expressive of unitary collective experiences technology is an important aspect of the interaction between cultures and in creating a hierarchy between communities' (2012, p.204). Accordingly, Ekumen believe that through the ansible, communication and development will be established based on their own ideas of what a functional and civilised society looks like rather than co-existing with other societies. This is reinforced in later novels during the gradual transformation from Ekumen to the 'League of All Worlds'.

IMPERIALISM AND THE ANSIBLE

Within 'The Left Hand of Darkness', the limited intergalactic communication prior to the ansible is revealed. The use of 'Nearly As Fast As Light' ships allowed individuals to travel across planets. However, an issue with this transportation was that the journey delayed political negotiations, 'A NAFAL ship takes 67 years to go between Gethen and Hain, but if I write a message on that keyboard it will be received on Hain the same moment I write it' (Le Guin, 2018b, p.37). Influenced by the authoritative government and the desire to improve communication, Shevek's invention leads to the 'League of All Worlds', which shapes the ensuing events in 'The Left Hand of Darkness' and 'The Word for World is Forest'. Here, the capabilities of the ansible are elaborated on. Within 'The Word for World is Forest', the ansible is explained, 'Its effect can be stated simply: the instantaneous transmission of a message over any distance. One element must be on a large mass body, the other can be anywhere in the cosmos' (Le Guin, 2015, p.44). This version contrasts Shevek's account that the ansible allows communication anywhere in the universe. While he regards the invention as a symbol of the freedom of communication, the 'League of All Worlds' views it as a tool with technical abilities and limitations. The ansible does not literally allow two entities to communicate anywhere in the universe, as one party must be on a planet or ship. Given this technicality, the League is able to use the ansible to further an imperial expansionist agenda and justify interfering with other communities. Communication and conflict, in turn, are significant themes across the various novels. Notably, Christian Fuchs (2019, p.141) defines language as 'a communicative means of production that humans use in the communication process for creating and reproducing social relations'. The ansible, likewise, as a communicative means, along with its technicalities, has become integral to building intergalactic social relations and securing the political authority of the 'League of All Worlds' in their interactions with other civilisations, including negotiation, control, and bargaining.

As an imperial asset, the ansible supposedly enables political and commercial activity yet leads to miscommunication. Genly Ai attempts to persuade King Argaven XV to allow his country of Karhide to join the 'League of All Worlds'. However, the king has a distrust of the ansible, stating, 'A bag of tricks and a trickster. You want me to believe you. Your tricks and messages' (Le Guin, 2018b, p.39). This shows that the promise of instant communication is not universally accepted as a societal advance. The king believes that instead of cooperating, he and his subjects will be deceived by using the technology. Referring to Bhabha (2012, p.208), 'the exercise of power may be both politically effective and psychically affective because the discursive liminality through which it is signified may provide greater scope for strategic manoeuvre and negotiation'. Representatives of the 'League of All Worlds', such as Genly, who possess the ansible, put the League in control of the negotiation process and lend them the advantage of exercising political power over others. The ansible technology allows Genly to communicate with and travel to Winter but does not aid his comprehension of the social and cultural differences between Genly and his home planet of Terra. This puts into question his capabilities as an envoy to represent the 'League of All Worlds' as a cooperative organisation. Just as the king distrusts the ansible, Genly distrusts the lack of distinct feminine and masculine roles in Gethenian society, and the two do not show understanding of the other's culture or practices. Through this interpretation, Genly's refusal to understand the people put him in danger, 'Ai repeatedly misperceives people and events, leading to mistakes that put his life at risk, before learning the irrelevance of gender when interacting with Gethenians, warning that unless he is very self-assured, or senile, his [successor's] pride will suffer' (Bould, 2009, p.137). Bould's argument emphasises that Ai's misperception of events and social structures creates consequences beyond simply alienating him from the nation he has been sent to negotiate with. Genly respects the king as a political ally but continues to view him and his people's behaviours as masculine or feminine despite the lack of gender roles within King Argaven's society, resulting in political hostility as the two fail to reach a mutual understanding of one another's nations.

OPPRESSION CAUSED BY THE ANSIBLE

Similarly, in 'The Word for World is Forest', the conflict between the Terrans and other cultures is no longer witnessed through Genly's perspective but through the protagonist Davidson, who commands a logging camp. The Terrans use the ansible to elevate themselves into a position of power. The need to expand on their own terms justifies their mistreatment of the population of other communities. The Terrans refuse to regard the Athsheans as equals which they use to justify their mistreatment of the population, 'Despite deriving from the same genetic stock, the humans refuse to consider the green-skinned natives as humans, but their frequent (and unpunished) rape of female Athsheans indicates a simultaneous recognition and disavowal of this relationship' (Bould and Sherryl, 2011, p.123), suggesting that cooperation between the two nations is not possible. By failing to acknowledge the Athsheans as equals, the population are forced to endure the oppressive assentation of the 'League of All Worlds' with little acknowledgement of the harm committed against them. As Bhabha (2012, p.159) states, 'The discriminatory effects of the discourse of cultural colonialism, for instance, do not simply or singly refer to a 'person', or a dialectical power struggle between self and other, or to a discrimination between mother culture and alien cultures'. The Terrans view themselves as superior to the Athsheans. Communication and negotiations are fundamentally exploitative as the Athsheans are affected by but do not have access to the ansible or its benefits. As they are seen as lesser beings, the mistreatment of their people by the League is not held accountable.

THE CONCEPT OF HUMANITY IN *ROCANNON'S WORLD*

In her short story 'Rocannon's World', another fictional communication concept of 'Mindspeech' is introduced. While the ansible represents a symbol of power and hierarchy, Mindspeech opens other potentialities. Rocannon perceives the power of Mindspeech as distinctly non-human, 'Clinging to his humanity, he had drawn back from the totality of power that the guardian of the well possessed and offered' (Le Guin, 2020, p.99). He is not so much repelled by the influence over others that Mindspeech could potentially open to him, as he is by its unfamiliarity and 'non-humanness'. Allowing himself to use Mindspeech fully would be a rejection of his humanity as his species naturally cannot access this ability, which was granted to Rocannon through intervention by an entity in a cave. This discomfort arises from the seeming need to correct unfamiliar behaviour if viewed as 'faulty' from the perspective of a foreigner to the native culture, such as Rocannon. Bhabha (2012, p.142) argues 'It is this echo that reveals that the other side of narcissistic authority may be the paranoia of power; a desire for "authorization" in the face of a process of cultural differentiation'. In Le Guin's other works, the 'League of All Worlds' regards discomfort of unfamiliar abilities, such as Mindspeech, as justification to correct behaviour to reinforce familiarity and thereby assert such narcissistic authority using the ansible. Rocannon initially expresses discomfort as well. Though, he still attempts to understand the strangeness of his ability. He describes Mindspeech as a non-verbal or linguistic form of comprehension, an intimate connection into the emotions and perceptions of beings of his own and other species, 'What he "heard" was not speech but intentions, desires, emotions, and the physical locations and mental directions of many different men jumbling and overlapping through his own nervous system, terrible gusts of fear and jealousy, drifts of contentment, abysses of sleep, a wild racking vertigo of half-understanding, half-sensation' (Le Guin, 2020, p.99). He uses sensory terms such as 'gusts' and 'drifts' to emphasise that he views the ability through a human lens instead of a being naturally capable of acquiring and mastering Mindspeech. Using this ability, Rocannon attempts to be more empathetic to the world and culture of the planet he acquired Mindspeech from, despite his inability to fully understand it.

MINDSPEECH AS ENABLING INTIMACY

Mindspeech is used at various times within the Hainish Cycle, including between Genly and Estraven. Genly offers to teach him to reinforce the bond between them and the trust they share, especially as Mindspeech operates on the condition that users cannot lie. Le Guin (2019b, p.16) clarifies this during an interview, 'Well, you're not supposed to lie in mindspeech [...] how can you lie when communicating directly from mind to mind'. It is not that the speaker is unable to lie, but the direct proximity of communicating between minds makes it impossible for a liar to get away with the act of lying. This is evident in 'Rocannon's World', where the ability is described as an effort from both individuals attempting to communicate, 'Understanding must be mutual, when loyalty was, and love' (Le Guin, 2020, p.99). Mindspeech will fail if the attempt to communicate is malicious or deceitful from one or both parties. This serves as an interesting comparison to the ansible since both remove physical space, yet Mindspeech is arguably a more intimate connection not only between individuals but also the natural world, reinforcing intimacy rather than reinforcing a desire to expand and control.

Although the ansible provides the opportunity for co-existence between communities, they are forced into the imperial hierarchy. Ekumen does not 'share appreciation for humanity, diversity, and learning' as the Terrans repeatedly show hostility and a lack of understanding of the social practices of the nations they make contact with (Robinson, 2021, p.70). Mindspeech

then allows for deeper connection and intimacy between individuals. It does not serve as a tool for political negotiation. Besides this, authenticity fosters connections between individuals and social groups, as evidenced by the relationship between Ai and Estraven. This contrasts the ansible, which reinforces hierarchy across different worlds.

THE SUPPRESSION OF OTHER FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

The possession of the ansible also suppresses other methods of communication within 'The Word for World is Forest'. Physical contact among the forest people is a fundamental aspect of their community, while for Terrans, touch is discouraged. This reinforces the discomfort between communities upon their proximity, 'touch was the main channel of communication among the forest people. Among Terrans touch is always likely to imply threat, aggression, and so for them there is often nothing between the formal handshake and the sexual caress' (Le Guin, 2015, p.76). This results in incompatible communication, exacerbated by touch itself, which contributes to hostilities towards each other's unfamiliar cultures. Unable to be conveyed through text, touch becomes a problem that cannot be addressed through the ansible's ability to relay written messages. Likewise, in 'The Left Hand of Darkness', this creates hostility, and the Terrans accuse the cultures they contact of sexual perversion. The revulsion toward unfamiliar behaviour leads to conflict between societies put in contact in the first place by the ansible. Accordingly, 'This process of complementarity as the agonistic supplement is the seed of the "untranslatable" - the foreign element in the midst of the performance of cultural translation' (Bhabha, 2012, p.325). For the Terrans, physical contact, as a 'foreign element', is interpreted as a threat within their culture no matter if the being communicating it belongs to their own species or a separate one. The discomfort is caused by an unfamiliar behaviour rather than an unfamiliar being due to different interpretations of the act.

The ansible enables a future of possibilities for the 'League of All Worlds'. In her 'Science Fiction and the Future' essay, Le Guin (2019b, p.140) describes that 'In such fictions [science fiction], space and the future are synonymous: they are a place we are going to get to, invade, colonize exploit, and suburbanise'. Science fiction set in space serves as an exploration of power, expansion, and the future. The ansible as a mode of transmitting communication implies that communication and expansion are interlinked, influencing the lives of people contacted, 'We have legal authority to do so. Of course, received by ansible' (Le Guin, 2015, p.56). The ansible serves as a fundamental aspect of the structure of power within 'The Word for World is Forest' through the communication of those in power to those oppressed by it. The ansible itself is neither morally good nor destructive. However, the influence on societies is dependent on the individual's intentions. Even in 'The Left Hand of Darkness', negotiations with the nation of Karhide are enabled by the ansible as the highest authority, 'when the ship comes down it will have an ansible aboard [...] and will be empowered to discuss and sign, a treaty of alliance with the Karhide. All this can be confirmed with Hain and the various Stabilities by ansible' (Le Guin, 2018b, p.292). The ansible is present in each stage of the negotiation process, from contacting Karhide to confirming the terms of the treaty. It is no longer a tool of communication as Shevek intended but has become a technology that reinforces political negotiation and military influence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through Ursula K. Le Guin's collected works, the ansible highlights the problems of communication between people from various societies, such as the desire for political control and the suppression of opposing cultures through the use of communication technology. While dismantling barriers of time and space faced by the 'League of All Worlds', it does not resolve the cultural and social differences between societies upon the removal of physical obstacles. Within 'The Left Hand of Darkness' and 'The Word for World is Forest', the ansible contributes to expansionist ideals and empire. The conflicts within Le Guin's various works are enabled by the invention of the ansible, especially as various formerly isolated cultures within the Hainish Cycle come into contact with one another. Their unfamiliar behavioural patterns mean that authoritative powers, such as the 'League of All Worlds', feel a need to correct these behaviours instead of gaining a mutual understanding, as Ai and Estraven demonstrate. The Terrans' lack of interest in understanding the cultures of communities they contact emphasises that the ansible does not enable communication for co-existence and mutual understanding but rather forced assimilation into a dominant culture. Through this, the ansible becomes a symbol of not only freedom of communication but also political power. The ability to communicate is no longer free but carries political weight as a bargaining tool that the other party must use to gain access to the 'League of All Worlds'' benefits.

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