



The Manifestation of Human Greed in Ursula K. Le Guin’s ‘*Those Who Walk Away from Omelas*’

Dr. Abdelrahman Jalal Othman

Department of English, College of Education and Languages, Lebanese French University, Erbil, Iraq.

Email: abdelrahman.jalal@lfu.edu.krd

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Soran University, Erbil, Iraq.

Email: abdelrahman.othman@soran.edu.iq

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of capitalism as the dominant system of economy and investment in the late twentieth century and with the use of all the different means to achieve the American Dream, humanity has been confronted with an unprecedented level of avarice and greed. The vast majority of the populations in different parts of the world were victimized as a result of the limitless level of possessional lust and greed of the few. Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* is a clever manifestation of this unfavorable condition. This research paper aims at highlighting the different means used by the author to question the readers’ ethical basis of accepting to base one’s happiness on the misery of others. The researcher indicates that the motivating force behind accepting such a bargain is uncontrolled greed. While the paper criticizes the prevailing norm of excessive material gain at whatever cost practiced by many people in the world; it also shows that only very few people are ready to take any effective action to put any limit to this inhumane phenomenon. Finally, even though the novel is depicting a gloomy view of the modern world, yet there is a glimpse of hope that the few good people can resist the status quo and refuse to live happily while the price is paid by innocent people.

1. Introduction

Named a living legend in 2000 by the US Library of Congress, Ursula Kroeber Le Guin (1929 – 2018) is one of the prolific writers of literature in America and the English language speaking world. She has authored over sixty literary works in different genres including novels, poetry, science fiction, criticism, and translation. However, as indicated by David Naimon (2018), she is best known for “her books of science fiction and fantasy”, especially those of the beginning of the 1970s. She has been awarded several prestigious awards including National Book Award and recurrent Hugo and Nebula among others.

Through her works, she has created a very high impact on both critics and the public. Her main concern is humanity and the problems that may affect humans in modern societies. According to Warren Rochelle (2001), “Le Guin takes us into her communities of the heart, communities that are truly human” (p. xii). She is portraying the problems of her age in such vivid and artistic imaginary works that seem to be realistic. She has so excelled in the field of science fiction that Barry Malzberg (1979) calls her “the most important contemporary writer of science fiction” and that the “field cannot be understood if she is not” (p. 9). Echoing the prestigious position occupied by Le Guin among writers, Harold Bloom, speaking in the late 1980s, believes that “there is no purer storyteller writing now in English than Le Guin” (1987, p. 3). This would make her a powerful figure in literary circles.

Le Guin's works have had a lasting impact on the genre of science fiction and fantasy. Her works have inspired generations of readers and writers, and her legacy will continue to live on for many years to come. Her works have been praised for their exploration of complex themes and their ability to engage readers in thought-provoking conversations. Her works have also been praised for their exploration of gender, race, and social issues. Le Guin's works will continue to be read and enjoyed for many years to come.

For Le Guin, literature is didactic and fictional works should always have a message that contributes to the development of human society. Describing the magic power of Le Guin's works, Sandra Lindow (2012) states that

Her ideas are in no way new; rather, her wide-ranging eclectic and idiosyncratic study of anthropology, sociology, psychology, theology, and mythology creates a meta-cognitive setting for stories and novels where the essence of human morality is revealed through taboo-challenging thought experiments into gender, family structure, and government. (p.1)

This indicates the wide range of knowledge about different fields of human sciences, including anthropology which occupies a special position for Le Guin since it was her father's occupation. She has successfully transformed knowledge through her fictional works to tackle the moral concerns in her society. That is why she is called "a serious novelist of ideas" (Spivack, 1984, p. 8). Ideas that many people may feel uncomfortable being made public because they do not match their interests. Social, political, and ethical problems were prevalent "during a period of Cold War anxiety and acute social and cultural crisis within Western societies" (Hubble, 2021).

Unfortunately, the vast advancement of technology and the huge increase in wealth does not correspond to the well-being and improved living condition of all human beings in an equal way. This is mostly due to the narcissism and the selfish behavior of some greedy individuals incited and protected by capitalist principles that propel modern societies in the West and the whole world in modern times. In the following section, the roots and the impact of this greed are tackled to highlight some of its negative consequences on humanity in general and the blunt miseries it creates on the most vulnerable layers of society specifically.

2. Roots and Evolution of Greed

Greed is a quality more often related to humans. It is an emotion that has been around since the dawn of time. It is a powerful emotion that can drive people to do things they would not normally do. Meriam Webster defines it as "a selfish and excessive desire for more of something (such as money) than is needed". It has been referred to as one of the deadliest sins in almost all the religious scriptures. Although a sort of greed is needed for economic growth (Bruhn & Lowrey, 2012), it becomes problematic when boundaries and limits are neglected for the sake of the narcissistic impulses of the self and ego. According to Keith Murnighan and Long Wang (2011), "a

common theme behind a variety of unethical and immoral actions, by both individuals and organizations, is greed”. In this way, excessive greed affects the morality of human behavior because of its diverse negative impacts on individuals as well as society as a whole.

Greed is a powerful emotion that can lead to a variety of negative outcomes. It can lead to a person becoming obsessed with acquiring wealth and material possessions. Thus, materialism exacerbates and paves the way for greedy behaviors, especially in modern times where spirituality and noble human traits are losing popularity to more materialistic worldviews. This view is best described by Tim Kasser (2002) when referring to the effects and some consequences, stating:

When materialistic values dominate our society, we move farther and farther from what makes us civilized. We treat each other in less humane ways. We allow the pursuit of money to take precedence over equality, the human spirit, and respectful treatment of each other. We permit materialistic values to undermine much of what could be the very best about our communities. (pp.91-92)

In this way, pursuing material gains and adoring greedily the possession of properties may transform us into machines void of emotions and feelings of interconnectedness which are considered unique to human societies. Quoting from Robert E. Lane’s *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, Kasser further emphasizes that “people who highly value materialistic pursuits are rated by interviewers as being less adapted to society and as exhibiting more antisocial behaviors” (p. 62). This can lead to a person neglecting their responsibilities and relationships in pursuit of their desires. Another negative impact of greed is that it can lead to a person taking advantage of others to get what they want. This can lead to unethical behavior such as fraud, bribery, and corruption. Another negative aspect of greed is that it can lead to a person becoming overly competitive. Consequently, people may find themselves engaging in unethical behavior to gain an advantage over their competitors. Greedy people often do not care much for their fellow citizens and people, in their perspective, are regarded as consumer tools. This can lead to a person engaging in

activities such as price fixing, insider trading, and other forms of market manipulation. This would usually add extra burden on people who are initially suffering from the high cost of living. In that sense, humanity is least considered in such kinds of transactions and, unfortunately, the most negatively affected parties are the most vulnerable sections of society like the low-income families, the elders, women, and children.

Greed can also make people become overly focused on their own needs and desires. This can lead to a person neglecting the needs of others and can lead to a person becoming selfish and self-centered. Individuals who prioritize materialistic goals over other values tend to have tense and shorter-lasting relationships with romantic partners as well as friends. They are more likely to experience a sense of detachment and isolation from society, and often have dreams that involve distancing themselves from emotional attachments with others (Kasser, 2002; Lane, 2000). This is in contrast to those who place less emphasis on materialism. This can lead to disintegrate the social relations and dry up the emotional as well as the spiritual support among the citizens of the society.

Greedy people are more likely becoming overly focused on their own success. This can lead to a person becoming obsessed with achieving their goals and can lead to a person neglecting their own health and wellbeing. Similarly, Charlotte Morabito (2022) indicates that “Americans are more stressed about money than they’ve ever been”. Although Morabito’s info is based on a survey conducted in the United States, the case applies to other communities in different parts of the world as well. Thus, greed is expected to make people become stressed and anxious and can drive a person to become affected by isolation and social detachment.

Greed can also negatively make some people becoming overly focused on their power and status. This can lead to a person becoming obsessed with gaining power and influence and can lead to a person engaging in unethical behavior to gain an advantage over others. This may lead to corruption and can lead to a person becoming a tyrant. Describing how the myth of ‘Greed is good’ has negatively affected the Americans’ mentality, Umair Haque (2019) states that

American economics says that you should always try to hoard all the money in an economy for yourself — that’s what “rationality” is: maximizing your profits, forever, as much as possible. Hence, unsurprisingly, that’s what American corporations, banks, hedge funds, and CEOs do. But none of this is rational, really. It’s just selfish and greedy.

So, making profits is the ultimate goal of capitalist economics which makes the foundation of American rationality. However, this rationality is false and can only generate greed and selfishness. This self-centered approach can have a negative impact on society. Greed also is expected to make humans become obsessed with acquiring wealth and material possessions and can lead to a person neglecting their responsibilities and relationships. It may drive a person to get engaged in unethical behavior in order to gain an advantage over their competitors and consequently lead to a person becoming corrupt and acting like a tyrant.

3. Greed as a phenomenon of the Modern age

As being mentioned earlier, greed has been and will be present in human societies but the level of its presence varies from time to time and from one place to another based on various reasons like educational systems, social factors, and cultures. The United States of America where Le Guin lived and wrote her fiction has witnessed the rise of unprecedented materialism especially in the second half of the twentieth century. The widespread interest in material gain and the rampant quest for profit-making of business institutions led many writers to label the era as the time or the age of greed (Madrack, 2011; Visser, 2015). The term ‘age of greed’ was used to describe the economic and political climate of the 1980s.

Madrack argues that this period was marked by a shift towards a deregulated financial system, where the pursuit of profit and self-interest superseded social values and the common good. Wall Street became the epicenter of this new era of finance capitalism, which fueled unprecedented wealth for a small elite while increasing income inequality and poverty for others. The age was characterized by a lack of ethical considerations in business and political decision-making, with a focus on short-term gains over long-term stability and sustainability.



One of the defining features of the Age of Greed was the rise of hostile takeovers fueled by junk bonds. These high-risk, high-yield bonds allowed corporate raiders to acquire companies despite resistance from management, often resulting in mass layoffs and other signs of corporate greed. The best example of this phenomenon is the case of Michael Milken, the so-called junk bond king, whose financial firm Drexel Burnham Lambert was responsible for several major mergers and acquisitions in the 1980s.

Another major scandal of the era was the Savings and Loan crisis, which began in the late 1970s and lasted until the early 1990s. The crisis was a result of deregulation, which allowed savings and loan institutions to pursue high-risk investments and speculative real estate projects. As a result, many institutions went bankrupt, costing taxpayers billions of dollars in bailouts.

Wall Street was also a key player in the Age of Greed. Insider trading became rampant, with traders using illegal tactics to manipulate the stock market for their gain. The most notable case was that of Ivan Boesky, a successful stock trader who was exposed for his involvement in insider trading schemes that netted him millions of dollars in profits. This event eventually led to the downfall of Boesky, and the imprisonment of other traders and businessmen for their roles in these schemes (Martin, 2021).

The Age of Greed also had significant environmental and social consequences. Environmental regulations were weakened or ignored, leading to the degradation of natural resources and the worsening of pollution. Social inequality also grew, as the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. The rise of corporate greed contributed to the decline of the middle class and left many workers struggling to make ends meet. The legacy of the Age of Greed is still felt today. Many of the policies and attitudes that fueled the economic excesses of the 1980s continue to shape American society. This has made the then president of the United States, Mr. Barak Obama (2009), refer to the prevailing attitudes of the first decade of the third millennium as “an attitude that valued wealth over work and selfishness over sacrifice and greed over responsibility”. The corporate power that emerged during this era has only grown stronger, as evidenced by the increasing influence of big tech companies and the dominance of Wall Street on the economy. The effects of the Age of Greed remind

the reader of the importance of ethical business practices and of the dangers of unchecked capitalism.

4- Omelas, the city of greed

Ursula K. Le Guin, in *"Those Who Walk Away from Omelas"*, portrays the life of the city inhabitants in minute details, especially the socio-economic and living conditions. This portrayal makes up the foundation of the principal equation on which the whole story is based. The basic idea is to explore themes of morality, empathy, and the consequences of greed.

The story begins by describing the citizens being indulged in all kinds of worldly pleasure. The atmosphere is a festive one that with the clamoring sound of bells urges 'swallows soaring'. The city has high-towered buildings and is located on the sea shore. Houses have red roofs and there are great parks and many public buildings. People are enjoying their time by listening to music and dancing. All means of majestic entertainment that one can imagine are available for the population and they can feel "next to the King, mounted on a splendid stallion and surrounded by his noble knights, or perhaps in a golden litter borne by great-muscled slaves" (Le Guin, 1991). This is a confirmation that all their physical and psychological needs are met.

Le Guin depicts all the extravagant and mind-blowing materialistic development of the modern life of the 1970s, like 'double decked trams', 'central heating', 'subway trains', 'washing machines', 'floating light-sources', and 'fuelless power'. The author even states that they have the possibility of having the "sweetness of drooz ... which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor" (Le Guin, 1991, p. 3). Additionally, in terms of sexual pleasure, people can have an 'orgy' to satisfy their sexual desires.

On the other side, the author tackles a very contradictory situation. A condition of a small child who is deprived of all the necessary means of a decent living. The child "could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten" (Le Guin, 1991, p. 4). The reason why it is so undernourished is "malnutrition and neglect". The author gives a detailed description of the child's physical condition by saying,

(t)he child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, 'eh-haa, eh-haa,' and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually. (Le Guin, 1991, p. 4)

This situation is exactly the opposite of the well-to-do populace of the city. Although the author describes a fictional city, in the real life this is how, demographically, the population is distributed in modern time cities based on their socio-economic conditions.

The link between these two different life conditions makes up the essence of the whole story since the prevalence of one is the condition for the existence of the other. The citizens of Omelas are well-aware that “their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, ... depend wholly on this child's abominable misery” (Le Guin, 1991, p. 4). Thus, Omelasians are willing to sacrifice the life of a child to maintain their comfortable, happy lifestyle. This action is not justifiable because the narrator describes them as "mature, intelligent, passionate adults" who have "learned to live with the knowledge of this one, enduring sadness." They are so inhumanely greedy that they accept such a bargain and never take any action to eliminate the suffering of that innocent child. Accepting to base one's happiness on the misery of others is a very unethical act of greed that makes poor and vulnerable people pay the price of the greedy people's excessive indulgence in lust and affluency. “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed” Gandi has noted (Murnighan & Wang, 2011, p. 283), but when people are not satisfied with what they have and decide to confiscate from others, the balance could not be maintained any longer. This is well explained by Murnighan and Wang (2011) when they state that “one person's greedy action almost always imposes costs on others” (p.283). Aquinas also believed to have a similar view on greed when he described it as “a sin directly against one's neighbor, since one man cannot over-abound in external riches, without

another man lacking them". What is even worse is the fact that those greedy people never feel guilty for that and they always try to justify their acts by blaming those whose rights have been violated and wronged.

The story related the whole community's happiness to the condition of a single child but in real life, individuals and communities are happily enjoying their prosperous living conditions on the misfortunes of other people and other nations. What one can sense of the different wars and crises in Africa, the Middle East, parts of Asia and even some parts of South America is a clear manifestation of greed practiced by some superpowers in the world against poor people in these places.

The story also touches on the idea of moral relativism, where the citizens of Omelas justify their actions by arguing that the child's suffering is necessary for the greater good of the city. The narrator states that "they feel they have no choice" and that "the happiness of the many outweighs the suffering of the one."

Even though the majority of the Omelasians accept the status quo, the author indicates that few people in Omelas are not willing to accept this idea. The title of the story refers to the people who choose to walk away from Omelas, unable to live with the knowledge of the child's suffering. They are unwilling to accept the morality of their society and choose to leave rather than ignore the suffering of an innocent child. However, the fact that the number of those who take advantage of the situation vastly outweighs the ones who walk away is an indicator of the level of greed that is prevalent in the city, and hence is why Omelas is referred to as the city of greed.

5- Conclusion

Ursula K. Le Guin's *'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas'* is one of the important literary works that criticize the living condition of human beings in the second half of the twentieth century through the medium of science fiction. Through poignant depictions and clever artistic expressions, the author presents one of the oldest problems of humanity that kept on following human beings throughout history which is the exploitation of other people's rights and assets for one's own interest. This act of exploitation is motivated and further intensified by one's uncontrolled greed which is perpetrated under different names and justified by different means.



The author has successfully juxtaposed two drastically different situations to let the reader judge the validity of the case, based on moral and ethical principles. In one case, people have a surplus of everything. Life is super-good and the populations are ultimately content with their level of joy and happiness that makes them feel like kings. Life is so generous to them that even nature provides them with all the facilities it can offer to the best possible extent. Not very far away from this utopian society, there is a completely opposite condition where people lack every single basic need of a decent living. Whatever is surplus in the first one is missing in the second. People in the first are living in high towers enjoying the beauty of the green fields and dancing to the sound of music. Simultaneously, there are others who are forcefully kept in dump cellars with dirt surrounding them from every direction. There is a shortage of food, and a lack of the necessary sanitation, and there is nobody to care about them or provide any kind of console.

What is shocking for the reader and manifesting the prevalence of high extent of greed in the community is the fact that links both societies together. The existence of the dire inhumane situation is a precondition for the sustainability and durability of the utopian one. Citizens, when they are old enough to take responsibility for their acts, are all informed about the case and this is why their action is not justifiable due to ignorance or disability. If they try to help the victim escape that dire condition, they will themselves be losing the prosperity they have. The fact that they do not show any sign of disagreement is an indication of their greed. Unfortunately, this is the case for the majority of the population of the city except for only a few who decide to leave the place. Their passive behavior is not enough to change the situation unless they decide to take an active role in reforming society and maintaining the balance between self-interest and public welfare.

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به دیار خستنی چا و چنۆکی مرۆف له پۆمانی ئەرسۆلا کرۆبیهەر لوگوهین ی " ئەوانه ی له ئۆمیلا س دوور ده که ونه وه "

پوخته:

له گه ل بلاو بوونه وه ی سیستهمی سه رمایه دار ی وه ک سیستهمی بالاده ستی ئابووری و وه به ره ینان له کۆتاییه کانی سه ده ی بیستهم و له گه ل به کاره ینانی هه موو هۆکاره جیاوازه کان بۆ گه یشتن به خه ونی ئەمه ریکا ((American Dream، مرۆفایه تی خۆی له به رامبه ر ئاستیک ی پێوانه یی چا و چنۆکی و خۆپه رستی بینیه وه. زۆرینه ی په های خه لک له شوینه جیاوازه کانی جیهاندا بوونه قوربان ی هزی هه بوون و چا و چنۆکی ژماره یه کی که می دانیشتون. پۆمانی " ئەوانه ی له ئۆمیلا س دوور ده که ونه وه " ی ئەرسولا کرۆبیهەر لوگوهین به رجه سته کردنیکی زیره کانه ی ئەو هه لومه رجه نه خوازاوه یه. ئامانجی ئەم توێژینه وه یه بریتیه له دیاریکردنی شیوازه جیاوازه کان که نووسه ری پۆمانه که به کاریان

دههينيت بو پرسيار خستنه سهر بنه ما ئه خلاقه كاني خوينه كاتيک كه سيك نامادهي ئه وهی تيدايه كه خوښيه كاني خوئی له سهر نه هامة تيه كاني كه سانی ديكه بنيات بنيت. تويزه جهخت له سهر ئه وه دهكات كه پالنهري سهره كي رازيبوون بهو مامه لهيه بریتيه له چاوچنوکیه كي بی جله و رها. له كاتيكا ئه م تويزينه وهی ره خنه ده گريت له وه له سوکوه ته به ربلاوهی هه نديک كه س له جيهاندا كه هه ولده دن بو به ده ستهينانی ده سته و تي مادی به هه ر نرخیك بيت، ئه م تويزينه وهيه ئه وه ش ده خاته روو كه ته نها ژماره يه كي كه م له خه لك نامادهي ئه وه يان هه يه كه هه نگاوی كاريگه ر بنين بو سنووردار كردنی ئه م ديارده نامرؤفانه يه. له كو تايبدا هه رچه نده رؤمانه كه ويئاي ديدگايه كي تاريخي سهرده مي نوئ دهكات، به لام هيشتا تروسكايي هيو ا به ديده كريت به وهی كه هه نديک كه سي باش هه ن كه رووبه رووی ئه م واقيعه ده بنه وه و نامادهين كه به دلخوشي بزین له كاتيكا باجي دلخوشبوونه كه يان له لايه ن كه سانی بيتاوانه وه بدریت.

بيان جشع الانسان في رواية ارسولا كروبير لوجوين "هؤلاء الذين يبتعدون عن اوملاس"

الملخص:

مع ايراز الرأسمالية كنظام ساند في الاقتصاد والتنمية في أواخر قرن العشرين ومع استخدام كافة الطرق المتاحة لتحقيق الحلم الأمريكي (American Dream)، واجه العالم مستوى قياسياً من الجشع والأنانية. أصبح اغلبية الناس في أماكن عديدة من العالم ضحية لحب التملك والجشع من قبل أناس قليلون. تعتبر رواية ارسولا كروبير لوجوين المعنونة بـ "هؤلاء الذين يبتعدون عن اوملاس" تعبيراً ذكياً لهذه الحالة الغير مرغوب فيها. الغرض من هذا البحث هو تسليط الضوء على الأساليب المتبعة من قبل كاتبة الرواية حول مسائلة الأسس الأخلاقية للقراء فيما يتعلق بقبول مبدأ بناء سعادة شخص على مآسي أشخاص آخرين. يشير الباحث الى أن القوة الدافعة لمثل هكذا تعاملات انما هي الجشع المطلق. في حين أن البحث ينتقد الوضع السائد عند بعض الناس في الحصول على الموارد المادية باي ثمن كان، يشيد أيضاً بأن هناك فقط قلة من الناس مستعدون للقيام بإجراءات فعالة للحد من هذه الظاهرة اللإنسانية. وفي النهاية وبالرغم من أن الرواية يصور مشهداً كئيباً عن العالم الجديد، إلا أن هناك بصيصاً من الأمل للإنسانية عندما يقوم بعض الناس بمواجهة الوضع السائد وعدم القبول بحياة هنيئة يدفع ثمنها أناس أبرياء.