

## 19. The reinvention of humanity: Language, power and rebellion in Le Guin's "She Unnames Them"

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**APA:** Komut Bakıncı, S. (2021) The reinvention of humanity: Language, power and rebellion in Le Guin's "She Unnames Them". *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (Ö9), 229-237. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.981540.

### Abstract

What role language plays in the process of construction of the Self is an area of debate in many fields including linguistics, psychology, philosophy and literature. *She Unnames Them (1985)* by Ursula K. Le Guin is a short story in which the power of language is manifested through the female protagonist's unnamings of animals in the Garden of Eden. Le Guin does not name the woman in the story because along with the animals, she gives her name back to Adam and his father. As a Biblical allusion of Genesis, the story gives readers a fresh version of the creation story in which women do not hold a passive, inferior, and subordinate position, on the contrary, the power of language is challenged and so is the position of authority. The female protagonist challenges the patriarchal assumption that power is the dominion of men and will remain so. Her rebellion causes a new life without inequality, stereotyping and, most importantly, without classes, to emerge. Through the female protagonist's self-reinvention, a new era begins seeing that she leaves Adam and the Garden of Eden, taking the future generations with her. This is not just a story of a self-reinvention of a woman who was once named Eve, rather this is the story of the reinvention of humanity.

**Keywords:** Language, power, unnamings, patriarchy, self-reinvention

## İnsanlığın yeniden keşfi: Le Guin'in "She Unnames Them" adlı eserinde dil, güç ve başkaldırı

### Öz

Benliğimizin inşa sürecinde dilin oynadığı rol dilbilim, psikoloji, felsefe ve edebiyat da dâhil birçok alanda süregelen bir tartışma konusudur. Ursula K. Le Guin'in *She Unnames Them (1985)* adlı eseri ise, bir kadın anlatıcının Cennet Bahçesindeki hayvanları isimsizleştirerek dilin gücünü açığa çıkarttığı bir kısa hikâyedir. Le Guin hikâyedeki kadını adlandırmaz, zira hayvanlar ile birlikte, kadın da kendi ismini Âdem'e ve babasına geri vermiştir. İncil'deki Yaratılışa da imada bulunan hikâyeye, okuyuculara yeni bir yaratılış hikâyesi sunmaktadır. Bu yeni yaratılış hikâyesinde kadınlar edilgen, daha aşağı konumda ve boyunduruk altında tutulmamakta; aksine, dilin gücüne ve otorite konumuna meydan okunmaktadır. Kadın anlatıcı, gücün erkeklerin hâkimiyetinde olduğu ve öyle kalacağına dair ataerkil varsayımına karşı koymaktadır. Onun başkaldırısı, eşitsizliğin, tektipleştirmenin ve en önemlisi sınıfların olmadığı yeni bir hayatın yeşermesine öncülük etmektedir. Kadın anlatıcı benliğini yeniden keşfederek Âdem'i ve Cennet Bahçesini arkasında bırakıp yeni nesilleri de yanına alarak yeni bir çağ başlatmaktadır. Dolayısıyla kadın, gelecek nesilleri de kendi yanına almaktadır. Bu hikâyeye, yalnızca bir zamanlar Havva adındaki bir kadının benliğini yeniden keşfettiği bir hikâyeye değil; daha ziyade, insanlığın yeniden keşfedilme hikâyesidir.

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**Anahtar kelimeler:** Dil, güç, isimsizleştirme, benliğin yeniden keşfi

*"I don't do messages. I write stories and poems. That's all. What the story/ poem means to you- its 'message' to you- maybe entirely different from what it means to me"*

Le Guin, 2016, p. 34

What role language plays in the process of construction of the Self is an area of debate in many fields including linguistics, psychology, philosophy and literature. Women, especially second wave feminists sought means to fight oppression of many kinds, one of which was their fight against sexist language since challenging this gendered nature of language was considered to be a significant way of empowering women. As one of the most influential weapons of male domination, language was soon recognized by second wave feminists to be a medium that women could start to use to change the status quo. This movement of the 1970s and early 80s was very prolific in that many feminist scholars and activists wrote books, articles, pamphlets and guidelines regarding how to change the language itself, which was believed, in Alette Olin Hill's words, to be "both an instrument of oppression and as a possible tool of liberation" (as cited in Laugesen, 2019, p. 241).<sup>2</sup> As a possible tool of liberation, language is used by women to reverse binary oppositions and undermine patriarchy.

*She Unnames Them* (1985), by Ursula K. Le Guin is a short story in which the power of language is portrayed through the female protagonist's unnamings of animals in the Garden of Eden. Even though it is a short story, there are many issues to be considered while trying to analyze *She Unnames Them*, such as language, nominalization, power relations, identity and rebellion. Though different, these issues are interrelated and, as a result, make analyzing Le Guin's famous parable considerably easier. Apart from those issues, this story can also be read in the ecofeminist discourse. Ecofeminism is a multifaceted movement with distinct elements. In its broadest sense, ecofeminism is the synthesis of ecological and feminist theories and activities. It represents a wide range of theoretical, practical, and critical attempts to comprehend and oppose the intertwined domination of both women and nature (Eaton, 2005, p.11). As a result, although it is a very short story of only one-page, multiple readings can be applied to analyze the text.

Amanda Laugesen (2019) defines linguistic activism as "an effort to change speech as part of a broader attitude to change cultural attitudes and from there to create social change and, in this case, to achieve greater equality for, and less discrimination against, women" (p.242). In her article that discusses Australian linguistic activism, she refers to different phrases that are used to define linguistic activism. Deborah Cameron, for instance, uses "verbal hygiene" while Anne Pauwels prefers "linguistic intervention" (as cited in Laugesen, 2019, p. 241). Laugesen states that for these activists:

"Language was not 'natural'; instead it was possible to query and deconstruct language and construct new knowledge. The feminism of the 1970s was also concerned with the nature of power and how power governed human relationships. An analysis of, and a call to change, language was part of this dissection and reimagining of power." (2019, p. 246)

Le Guin wrote *She Unnames Them* in 1985, when the linguistic activism of second wave feminists was on the rise globally; feminists from different countries were fighting against sexist language along with other issues. When the story was republished in "Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences" as the last story, the

2 Dale Spender, *Language of Sexism* (1975) and *Man Made Language* (1980)  
Robin Lako, "Language and Woman's Place" (1973)  
Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women* (1976), *Handbook of Non-Sexist Writing for Writers, Editors and Speakers* (1980).

author explained why it "had to come last in this book because it states (equivocally, of course) whose side (so long as sides must be taken), I am on and what the consequences (maybe) are" (Le Guin, 1987, p. 229). As a result, we can certainly claim that by referring to taking sides, she assures the readers that she is on the side of the feminists and also reminds that it is not an option but an obligation to show where one stands.

As human beings, we can critically evaluate and better achieve our ideas and objectives by looking back at prior methods of doing things and previous ways of living our lives (Elliott, 2013, p. 93). In her article "Revisioning Gender: Inventing Women in Ursula K. Le Guin's Nonfiction", Lisa Hammond Rashley (2007) argues that in the story the author is "challenging patriarchal narratives of women's lives" (p.44). We can deduce that by challenging these very well-known narratives, as many other women writers do, Le Guin both critically evaluates past narratives to understand the present situation of women and points to the possibility of a better future.

The story also focuses on identity construction considering the female protagonist's experience and rebellion. In Carol Howe Hamblen's words: "Names symbolize a person's identity" (1979, p. 247). One's identity is developed and shaped by the society in which one lives. This identity construction is influenced by many factors including genetics, environment, societal norms, family dynamics, but language is also a significant factor shaping one's identity. In her discussion about "hate speech" Judith Butler (1997) asserts that we are linguistic creatures who need language to function and our sensitivity to language is defined by its rules (p. 1-3), which simply puts forward the importance of language in the construction of one's identity. In the story, the unnamed woman is trying to dismantle the domination of the man through language. In this way, his power is undermined, so too is his domination. This performance of unnamings is powerful because she reinvents herself along with other life forms, which turns this self-reinvention into the reinvention of humanity. Patriarchy is undermined in the Garden of Eden, where it was first formed, formulated and applied, and future generations, thereby, are freed from man's domination.

The following passage is quoted from the New American Standard Bible (1995), Genesis 2 (7-8), which tells how Adam and Eve were formed and what happened thereafter:

Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. The Lord God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed.

...

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." 19 Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. 21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. 22 The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. 23 The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones,

And flesh of my flesh;

She shall be called Woman,<sup>3</sup>

Because she was taken out of Man."<sup>4</sup>

(Genesis, 2 (19-23) The Creation of Man and Woman, NASB 1995)

3 Hebrew *Ishshah*  
4 Hebrew *Ish*

In summary, God creates Adam first and sees a necessity to give him some company, "a suitable helper" for which reason he creates other living creatures, only to give Adam authority to name them all. However, these creatures do not meet his needs and God creates the woman from Adam's rib. Like all the other creatures, the woman is named by Adam as 'Woman'. According to Nuessel, onomastic theorists put forward that giving a name is a demonstration of exerting power on the grounds that the individual being named, much like a child or a pet, is set in the position of subject and is regularly perceived as being of an inferior position to the name giver (Melzow, 2012, p. 356).<sup>5</sup> Adam, by naming the woman and other living creatures, holds the superior position from the very beginning. As the subject of this hierarchy, the name giver becomes the authority figure who controls and constructs the lives of the inferior objects.

*She Unnames Them* starts with the woman character unnamming other animals: "MOST of them accepted namelessness with the perfect indifference with which they had so long accepted and ignored their names" (Le Guin, 1985, p. 27). The first part of the story, which is written in the third person, portrays how the animals react to this process; some of them protest at the beginning and then accept, some do not care about their names, while others approve "enthusiastically to give their names back to the people to whom, as they put it, they belonged" (Le Guin, 1985, p.27). Those that resist changing their names are reminded that "the issue was precisely one of individual choice" and that they are totally free to choose their own names, which causes them to willingly give up their existing names. In the second part of the story after all the animals are unnamed, the narration changes to the first-person:

NONE were left now to unname, and yet how close I felt to them when I saw one of them swim or fly or trot or crawl across my way or over my skin, or stalk me in the night, or go along beside me for a while in the day. They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear. And the attraction that many of us felt, the desire to feel or rub or caress one another's scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another's blood or flesh, keep one another warm -- that attraction was now all one with the fear, and the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food. (Le Guin, 1985, p. 27)

It is common to change the point of-view in a work of fiction, yet the transition to first person narration at this point of the story is far more significant than the common usage. This transition occurs when the woman finishes unnamming animals, when she starts feeling closer to them as if the names had been separating them "like a clear barrier". As soon as the barriers are destroyed, her fears disappear, and they start feeling attraction and desire for each other. In this regard, the short story might be examined by way of an ecofeminist critique given that the unnamed narrator finds herself in harmony with nature after her action. From an ecofeminist viewpoint, life in nature is sustained through "cooperation, mutual care, and love" (Shiva, V., & Mies, M, 2014, p.6). In the story, nature, and therefore the lifeforms that inhabit it, were based on Adam's superiority over other creatures including the woman. This created an atmosphere where all these lifeforms were separated from one other, stereotyped, and left to live apart from each other, which positions the other dangerous and thus an enemy. Tearing down all these barriers by unnamming animals, the woman protagonist helps in the development of "a new cosmology and a new anthropology" which is advocated by ecofeminists (Shiva, V., & Mies, M, 2014, p.6). The unnamed character's performance could also be explained as a form of rebellion that promises a new life without hierarchy, inequality and stereotyping. This rebellion not only destroys the barriers between animals but also brings human beings closer to other animals and other human beings. Consequently, this act of unnamming might open possibilities for a classless society, one which, in Lee Cullen Khanna's words, would be "a new more inclusive experience of paradise" (1991, p. 50).

5 For more discussions about nominalisation see Charles Kauffman, "Names and Weapons"(1989), Kenneth Burke *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966)

One might further claim that the act of unnamings might be an indication of the discovery of the power of language, which enables her to free herself from the categorizations and boundaries that define her, and finally to reinvent her own identity. In this regard, reference can be made to Michel Foucault to illustrate the link between language and power in general. In *Power/Knowledge* Foucault writes that "In the end, we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of true discourses which are the bearers of the specific effects of power" (1980, p.93). Following this, it can be inferred that by destroying the barriers between human beings and animals, also between different species of animals, what the woman does reverses the situation that Foucault describes, and she and other species are freed from judgements, condemnations, and classification, and they are no longer "destined to a certain mode of living or dying". This, certainly, changes the power relations in the Garden of Eden.

According to Foucault, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (1998, p. 93). Despite this claim, Foucault does not believe that power is a completely negative force which represses, constraints, perverts or diminishes, it is also productive. It is not a static, but rather it is a relationship between the subject and the object(s). He argues that "it[power] traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" and "needs to be considered as a productive network" (Foucault, 1980, p. 119). In Le Guin's story, we can see the examples of a power network and how it produces a resistance. In the Garden of Eden, power is exercised by two agents: Adam and his father, God. God creates Adam and gives him the authority to name the animals and the woman, an act that constructs the hierarchy among them. Following Foucault, we can also state that "power establishes a network through which it freely circulates" (1980, p. 99); hence, God creates his own network: the first human being and the other creatures to help him. Foucault further argues, "The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle" (1980, p.98). In this analysis, the most important vehicle in this Foucauldian power network is Eve. She is created to obey Adam, named by her master and is a vehicle for the extension of this power network. As Foucault also argues, "there are no relations of power without resistances" (1980, p.142). The main vehicle of her own oppression in this power network is the woman, and she understands the problem of being named and classified by Adam and thus she finds a way to assert her own power. This resistance is a step towards creating her own identity and rejecting a future that is predestined for her and future generations.

When Eve was created, just before she was named, God says:

"I will greatly multiply  
Your pain in childbirth,  
In pain you will bring forth children;  
Yet your desire will be for your husband,  
And he will rule over you."  
(Genesis, 3 (16), The Fall of Man, NASB 1995)

The last line of the above quote shows the inevitable and unquestionable fate of the woman and future generations. This was written in the sacred book, by the creator, whose judgement cannot be questioned, whose words cannot be rewritten. According to God's own words, it is the woman who will be responsible for the pain of childbirth and, more interestingly, her pain will be multiplied and yet the woman will still crave for the man who will "rule over" her. However, Le Guin does not find this fate suitable for the protagonist. In her fresh version of humanity, she creates a world where the woman does not let the man

"rule over" her. By doing so, she shows the reader that the first woman on earth will not submit to the first man, and that future women will not be taught to be submissive to the men around them or, potentially, any kind of authority. In this way, she starts to shatter binary oppositions regarding men and women. As Khanna suggests this is "no longer the generic tension of binary opposition, but the gendered quest for difference that constitutes Le Guin's Utopian enterprise" (1991, p.50).

A careful reader would notice that Le Guin, never uses "Eve" for the unnamed protagonist. This deliberate withholding of her name is another means to undermine the patriarchal order. In Genesis 3, 17 we read "Now the man called his wife's name Eve<sup>6</sup>, because she was the mother of all the living" (The Fall of Man, NASB 1995). Likewise, in the story Adam in fact names the unnamed narrator. Only after she unnames the animals, does she start questioning her own situation. She says, "This was more or less the effect I had been after. It was somewhat more powerful than I had anticipated, but I could not now, in all conscience, make an exception for myself" (Le Guin, 1985, p.27). The result exceeds even her anticipation and she starts feeling empowered by her own action. It is only then she approaches Adam to speak for herself, saying: "You and your father lent me this, gave it to me, actually. It's been really useful, but it doesn't exactly seem to fit very well lately. But thanks very much! It's really been very useful" (Le Guin, 1985, p.27). This is significant in that here, finally, we see her constructing her own identity after refusing the patriarchal order by giving her name back to God and Adam. This can be considered contradictory because she uses the word "useful" twice, which might be an indication of an honest remark instead of being irony. Why does she think that it has been useful? One might argue that having been named and stereotyped before, she has experienced domination and therefore is able to see the importance of names, the importance of language, and so have a chance to change her fate, and that of every other woman who will come after her, as well as all animals.

The issue here is not just exerting one's authority through naming, it is also about creating discourses through language, which will constitute the "regimes of truth" of each society that formulate what is wrong and what is right. We should also consider the importance of language as a means of written communication. As a woman who creates a world according to her own desire, Le Guin subverts phallogocentric language from the very beginning, from the creation of human beings. Second-wave feminists famously urged women to write from their point of view, to include themselves in the text, to write with "the white ink". Simone Galea (2014) writes that the aim was "to exceed that which is ordained by a phallogocentric socio-cultural system and to seek ways through which new selves are born through different kinds of writing" (p.147). The phallogocentric socio-cultural system that Galea refers to is significant in that women have learned their given position in society which forces them to act in such a way that their position never changes, and men's superior position stays intact. Furthermore, thorough spoken and written language, this dynamic is always restructured, and women unwittingly become vehicles of their own stereotyping and even oppression.

Unnaming, consequently, is not just about portraying, undermining and rejecting Adam's authority over the woman or other animals, it is also about deconstructing the phallogocentric language that privileges the masculine and reinforces male domination. In her famous article "American Gynocriticism", Elaine Showalter sees Le Guin's *She Unnames Them* as a reaction to what she calls the "authoritarian father's library". She writes that Le Guin suggests "women's writing should be rule breaking, playful, sensuous, anarchic: women should remake language and write in the Mother Tongue" (Showalter, 1993, p.115). Showalter's use of the phrase Mother Tongue should not be misunderstood; she means a language that is purified from the phallogocentric language that dominates and controls women and recreates itself through this domination. Seeing as men have controlled philosophy, social life, the legal structure, education, and

business and religious spheres, they have had the authority to exert their influence on practically every domain of life. Literature is no exception. Women who have struggled to challenge men's superior position use all the tools available to them. In this context, power networks to which women are subject are of great significance. Recalling Foucault, we might argue that having understood her position in power network of God and Adam, the unnamed woman recognizes the power of language and the necessity for resistance, which, according to Foucault, each power relation creates.

Adam's reaction to the woman's actions is also worth discussing here inasmuch as it, or lack of it, is significant. He has been created to be served and obeyed and she is the first woman who has been created to serve; as the first man on earth, he sets a precedent for his own generation. The story continues as follows:

"He was not paying much attention, as it happened, and said only, "Put it down over there, O.K.?" and went on with what he was doing.

One of my reasons for doing what I did was that talk was getting us nowhere, but all the same I felt a little let down. I had been prepared to defend my decision. And I thought that perhaps when he did notice he might be upset and want to talk. I put some things away and fiddled around a little, but he continued to do what he was doing and to take no notice of anything else" (Le Guin, 1985, p. 27).

As this suggests, Adam is portrayed as indifferent or ignorant, paying no attention to either her feelings or her words. The woman also tells the readers that "talk was getting us [them] nowhere", which shows us the lack of communication between the two (Le Guin, 1985, p. 27). Adam's total ignorance of the woman might well be a result of this lack of communication: he does not care to listen to her. One might further argue that what Le Guin does with the story in general is a call for action for feminists. Le Guin, therefore, might be advising her contemporary feminists to stop trying to compromise and act instead. The woman's disappointment is also worth discussing here. The choice of the past perfect tense ("had been prepared") indicates that the woman had been planning this confrontation and she had planned what to say and how to defend her position, which are signs of a healthier level of communication where one tries to make oneself heard and understood. However, Adam's being totally oblivious, and ignorant is another indication of the patriarchal order's general attitude towards women. The unnamed woman, despite feeling empowered, is nevertheless disappointed and has to be strong to end the game.

I have suggested above that this is a story of rebellion, which initiates the woman's construction of her identity, a reinvention of the Self that might change the course of history. The next step the unnamed protagonist takes is an indication of this rebellion.

"At last I said, "Well, goodbye, dear. I hope the garden key turns up."

He was fitting parts together, and said, without looking around, "O.K., fine, dear. When's dinner?" "I'm not sure," I said. "I'm going now. With the..." I hesitated, and finally said, "With them, you know," and went on out."

(Le Guin, 1985, p.27).

Even when Adam hears the word "goodbye" he does not pay attention and asks for his dinner. His reaction is understandable because he cannot imagine that she, who has been created as a "suitable helper" and later punished by being ruled over by him, is able to leave him. This last reaction of Adam (asking when the dinner is) demonstrates that he believes that the woman, whom he has named, is taken for granted and whatever he does or does not do, she is supposed to be there for him. By portraying Adam as an ignorant man not giving attention to what he is being told and asking for the dinner instead, Le Guin reminds the readers of the traditional gender roles that are assigned to women. The unnamed woman cannot tolerate this

assignment, having felt empowered by unnamings others and reclaiming her identity, she is ready to revolt. This is not a violent rebellion, rather it is a constructive and promising one.

One should pay attention to the final words of the woman before she leaves Adam in the Garden of Eden. She says: "I am going now. With the... With them, you know" (Le Guin, 1985, p.27). This sentence is fascinating because "them" might refer to many things; the animals that she unnamed, plants, some objects they share, or most importantly, their babies, meaning the future generations. When the future generations are not raised in a patriarchal society in which she is ignored and underrated, the next generation will automatically be reinvented. Instead of having to put up with what has been decided and written for her and being a vehicle in the power network that diminishes her value, disregards her and forces her to live in such a society, the unnamed protagonist takes an action that changes everything. She saves not only herself but also future generations.

In discussing Ursula Le Guin's fiction, Theodore Sturgeon states that one can find "courage, endurance and risk", and that she "examines, attacks, unbuttons, takes down and exposes our notion of reality" (as cited in Geyh et. al, 1998, p. 520). As an allusion to the Biblical Genesis, Le Guin's short story *She Unnames Them* gives readers a fresh version of the creation story. Notwithstanding being a one-paged very short story, it is rich in meaning and can be analyzed from different perspectives. In this new version of the creation story, in which women do not hold a passive, inferior, and subordinate position, but on the contrary, the power of language is relayed and so consequently the position of authority. The female protagonist starts by unnamings animals, she then gives her name back to Adam and finally leaves him. Hence, she challenges the patriarchal assumption that power resides in the dominion of men and will remain so. A new life without inequality, stereotyping and, most importantly, without classes, emerges with her rebellion. Through the female protagonist's self-reinvention, a new era begins seeing that she leaves Adam and Garden of Eden taking the future generations with her. She starts a new order and "construct[s] it according to her own experience of community with the other creatures of the world" (Cornell, 2005, p.100). In this regard, this is not just a story of a self-reinvention of a woman who was once named Eve, rather this is the story of the reinvention of humanity. In the same speech that was quoted at the beginning of this article, Le Guin says "What my reader gets out of my pot is what she needs, and she knows her needs better than I do" (Le Guin, 2016, p. 34). Thus, the story is always open to various analyses depending on the readers' needs.

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