



Reading of *Lavinia*, a Revisionary Novel by Ursula Le Guin to Understand Lavinia's Agentic Gift of Numinous Epistemology

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Abstract:

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is generally believed to be the seminal text which challenged the patriarchally dominated literary canon by pointing out the "collective myth" of presumably great writers with reference to the portrayal of women characters in their writings. Beauvoir's writing provided an impetus for the next generational writers who through their incisive writing pointed out that throughout patriarchal history women have always been portrayed and written about through male gaze and male perspective. However, it was with revisionary writing impelled through postmodern view on gender that writers began to revision the canonized texts through the perspective of hitherto silenced characters, especially women to point out the parallel or alternate narrative, the narrative which draws attention of its readers to the gaps and silences in the patriarchal texts. *Lavinia* by Ursula Le Guin which is the focus of the present paper is one such revisionary novel which revisits *Aeneid*, the epic poem of Vergil in which Vergil, while doing complete justice to Aeneas, the protagonist of the epic in terms of his characterization, completely overlooks Lavinia, Aeneas's wife, who too was instrumental when it came to the foundation of pre-Roman society. This paper studies the titular narrator of Le Guin's revisionary novel to understand her as an agentic individual through her gift of numinous epistemology.

Keywords: postmodern perspective, patriarchy, gender, agency, numinous epistemology, piety, sacred forest of Albunea.

Introduction:

Lavinia written and published in 2008 by Ursula Le Guin is a revisionary novel based on the last six books of *Aeneid*, the epic poem written by Vergil between 29 and 19 BC. In the original epic Lavinia is reduced to such marginality that though considered to be the founding mother of pre-Rome along with Aeneas, her husband, she doesn't get a single opportunity to express herself. In fact, in the entire epic Lavinia only has three appearances and even in these appearances she is described through the actions of others around her. Le Guin's revisionary novel makes this marginalized character the hero of her novel as Le Guin's novel is focussed on "Lavinia's battles", not physical like that of Aeneas, but battles on the home front and her refusal to be bowed down to anyone's domination except that of her oracularly guided fate. In fact, Le Guin's Lavinia through her uncanny gift of numinous epistemology i.e., the power to know the unknown, compels yet to be born Vergil in his spirit form to be her oracular guide and not just listens to his imaginative epic poem which lets her know about her future but also makes him understand in a true postmodern perspective on gender the misjudgements and errors in terms of her characterisation in his poem.

Forest of Albunea—the Sacred Grove and an Idyllic Home for Lavinia:

Le Guin's Lavinia first lets her readers understand the significance of the forest of Albunea and the purpose of her frequent visits to the forest. Lavinia informs her readers that this was the pre-Roman eighth century pagan society which though was patriarchal in terms of the specified gender roles, when it came to the understanding of gender attributes, it was more about beliefs such as piety which Lavinia explains as being, "responsible, faithful to duty, open to awe" (24), *fas* (doing the right thing), and most importantly respect for the unknown i.e. oracular guidance of their ancestors which were given paramount importance and thus these beliefs, irrespective of one's gender were the integral part of one's life. Le Guin here wishes her readers to understand that this was the primitive Roman society where supernatural which was mainly concerned with contacting with the spirits of the ancestors was not considered as superstition, but was part of the routine life of the pagan Romans.

Lavinia then lets her readers know that Latinus, king of Latium and her father was respected not just as a great warrior who brought peace to his kingdom but that along with being a powerful king Latinus was also recognized for his power of knowing the unknown through his ability to contact the spirits of his ancestors speaking through the forest of Albunea. Lavinia tells the readers that whenever Latinus was disturbed in his mind, he visited the sacred forest to seek oracular help of his ancestors. Thus, forest of Albunea appears as "the most



important” unknown force in Le Guin’s novel whose oracular power was unquestionably accepted and respected by the early Romans. In fact, Le Guin’s novel suggests that heeding to the oracular guidance was related to *fas*, the right thing to do, the emotional state where the free will of an individual and the oracular voice cohered with each other in perfect harmony.

This is the forest which becomes Le Guin’s Lavinia’s frequent haunt to escape her suitors, especially her cousin Turnus, the king of Ardea and apparently the most eligible of suitors among all the other contenders vying to marry her. Lavinia here lets her readers understand her refusal to accept Turnus who in spite of having all the qualities of being a perfect warrior king, became an unthinkable possibility when it came to accepting him as her future husband. Lavinia confides in her readers that Amata, her mother was never able to come out of her grief after losing her two younger sons to a fatal fever, fever which miraculously spares six-year-old Lavinia, who remembers having been pecked by her grandfather Picus in her dream and recovering soon after, while her younger siblings became victims of the deadly fever. Lavinia tells her readers that Amata could never accept this incident as part of her destiny and instead of valuing the daughter who was spared from the deadly fever begins to blame this daughter as the cause of death of her sons and thus remains an unloving and antagonistic mother to her. Lavinia describes her mother’s irrational behaviour with her after the death of her two siblings by telling them, “Sometimes my presence drove her into actual frenzy. She would strike me or shake me till my head snapped back and forth. Once the fury drove her to tear at my face with her nails” (8-9). Though apparently defenceless as a child to resist her mother’s irrational fury directed at her, Lavinia very soon learns to be an agentic individual even within the domain of constrictions around her. Accordingly, during the interactions with her mother, which she knew couldn’t be totally unavoidable, Le Guin’s Lavinia learns to treat and use silence and meekness as her strategies to deal with her mother’s frenzied behaviour with her.

Le Guin’s Lavinia then lets her readers know that Amata, her mother did change when Lavinia grew towards womanhood, but not in terms of being a loving mother. Le Guin’s Lavinia confides in her readers that though Amata continued to be an unhappy mother, in Lavinia’s womanhood she could now see a possibility of getting back one of her sons. Thus, when young Turnus, her brother’s son comes as a suitor for her daughter, Amata sees an opportunity to reclaim one of her dead sons. However, her obsession to reclaim a dead son through Turnus gradually veers towards getting completely infatuated by Turnus and she begins to woo him openly in front of the other suitors, though for her daughter. Lavinia tells her readers that as the only daughter of a powerful kingdom, she knew that marriage was not

an avoidable option to her but at the same time marrying Turnus was such an aversive idea to her that she tells her readers that, "I did not care who it was so long as it was not Turnus. There was nothing much wrong with Turnus himself, but much wrong in the way my mother looked at him" (37). Le Guin's Lavinia here points out to her readers that it was not just her but even the people in king's house such as Drances, an old friend and advisor of Latinus, Vestina, the old nurse of Lavinia as well as women working as slaves such as Maruna and Maruna's mother were aware of Amata's excessive obsession with Turnus which clearly indicated incestuous connotation. Lavinia thus lets her readers understand that under these circumstances she could feel nothing but extreme aversion when it came to Turnus attempting to woo her with the encouragement of her mother.

Lavinia thus, lets her readers understand that as a young girl not ready to marry Turnus but also not yet ready to oppose her parents openly, especially her mother, the only way she could think of to avoid the stressful situation at home was by way of escaping her home and going to the sacred forest to seek the much-needed solitude. Lavinia thus confides in her readers that "All I wanted when I went there was to sleep there, in that silence, with those spirits around me, in the numen of Albunea. A night there clarified my heart and quieted my mind, so that I could come back and do my duty" (36).

Lavinia tells her readers that it was at the age of twelve that she was first introduced to the sacred forest by her father and during her first visit itself she experienced the supernatural state of sleep and dream, the dream in which Picus, the powerful grandfather of Latinus recognized by the people of Latium in the form of a woodpecker touched her lightly across her eyes. Latinus, who was already aware of his daughter's uncanny gift, deciphers the dream for his daughter and tells her, "Albunea is in his gift. He and the other powers of the woods. He has given you the freedom of it daughter. He has opened your eyes to see" (31). Latinus also lets his daughter know that as a girl gifted with the sacred power of Albunea she had full freedom to visit the place whenever she felt the need to do so. Though not during that time, but later, when the suitors begin to visit Lavinia, especially Turnus to win her hand in marriage, Lavinia feels the need to escape her house and seek shelter in the peace and spirits of the forest. Thus, forest of Albunea becomes an escape and idyllic place away from the stressful situation at home.

Lavinia's Interaction with the Spirit of Vergil, the Spirit which Recognizes and Accepts Lavinia as an Agentic Individual:



Lavinia next tells her readers that it was during her eighteenth year, when it was clear to her that she “had” to choose among one of her suitors; in fact, there was no choosing because Turnus was the one who was constantly pushed by Amata as the most eligible suitor, Lavinia once again seeks the shelter of forest of Albunea. Lavinia further confides in her readers that, “For the first time I wondered if I might hear the voice that my father heard speak from among them in the dark” (40). Though Lavinia does experience supernatural state of sleep and dream, in her dream she is visited not by the spirit of ancestors, but Le Guin’s Lavinia finds herself face to face with her poet – the poet who had completely marginalized and silenced her in the entire epic. Le Guin’s revisionary novel here in a true postmodern re-visionist manner gets the original writer to converse with his unvoiced character from the epic, the writer who is not yet born, the writer who wrote his epic several centuries later before the events described in his epic took place and who travels back several centuries in his spirit form to tell Lavinia that his body is dying at Brundisium in some unknown future and thus apologizes to her for not doing justice to her in his unfinished epic.

The first thing that the spirit of Vergil notices in Le Guin’s Lavinia is her confidence, her self-assuredness, her knowledge as well as her courage and her rational outlook, the attributes which in his poem were reserved especially for men. Lavinia lets her readers know how Vergil in his wraith form admits to Lavinia his grave mistreatment when it came to Lavinia’s characterisation:

‘She came to Albunea by herself.’ He said, speaking into the darkness,’ and knew the sacred names of the river, and had no wish to be married. And I knew nothing of all that! I never looked at her. I had to tell what the men were doing... (42-43).

Le Guin’s revisionary novel thus though as is quoted by the writer herself is to “follow Vergil, not to improve or reprove him” (Afterword 291), very subtly makes the poet although in his spirit form, accept his misjudgements, especially when it came to Lavinia’s strong and assertive personality which was completely overlooked by the poet.

Lavinia’s interactions with her poet becomes the focal point of Le Guin’s novel because Le Guin’s Lavinia as the spirit of Vergil understands, was not a silent and meek maiden as he thought but was a fiery and spirited girl refusing to blindly listen or accept whatever the poet told or narrated to her. Lavinia thus throughout her dialogues with the poet not just displays

herself as a thinking and rational individual to her poet but also debates, disagrees and at time criticizes her poet when she feels that his knowledge about the people, gods and beliefs in his epic completely contradicted with the culture that she was part of. Thus, when Vergil's spirit narrates to Lavinia about the underworld and the souls of babies who died before they lived, the souls which "lie there on the mud, in the reeds, in the dark, wailing" (64), she reproaches the poet sternly,

'Why would they be punished for not having lived? How could their souls be there before they had time to grow souls? Are the souls of the dead kittens there and of the lambs we sacrifice, and of miscarried foetuses? If not them, then why babies? If you invented that marsh full of miserable dead crying babies, it was misinvention. It was wrong.' (64)

If this was the fiery reply of Lavinia related to the souls of babies, when it comes to Vergil's narration related to the gods fighting among themselves and how their jealousy and fights lead to human suffering, Lavinia once again refutes his presumption by questioning him, "Is a river jealous of another river, is earth jealous of the sky? (69). Le Guin's novel here points out to the readers that to the spirit of Vergil, Lavinia proved to be such a critical thinker that eventually Vergil accepts his inability to provide any satisfactory answers to the questions raised by her. Vergil in fact, also calls her the "foremother of Lucretius" (70), the great philosopher and contemporary of Vergil known for his scientific outlook towards studying the natural phenomena. Vergilian spirit even admits to Lavinia that what little he thought of her was "stupid, conventional, unimagined" (61) and though he wishes to destroy it, he can't do so because he knows that he was dying and those people around him would publish his unfinished poem. Vergilian spirit however, along with being her oracular guide in terms of letting her know that she was fated to marry Aeneas and not Turnus, that war was an inevitable occurrence between the Trojans and Italians, that Turnus and all her other suitors are going to die in the war, that she herself along with Aeneas, and their descendants will be known as the founders of pre-Roman society, also requests Lavinia to finish his unfinished poem. Vergilian spirit in a self-confessional mode tells Lavinia that he now understands that why of all the people of his poem why it was Lavinia who called him in his spirit form and then answers his own question:

You're almost nothing in my poem, almost nobody. An unkept promise. No mending that now, no filling your name with life, as I filled Dido's. But it's there, that life ungiven, there, in you. So now, at the end, when it's too late,



you have it to give it to me. My life. My earth of Italy, my hope of Rome, my hope. (66)

Le Guin's Lavinia thus by getting the original writer in her revisionary narrative lets him understand and accept his misjudgements. Along with this, Le Guin's Lavinia through her postmodern perspective on gender makes the poet recognize that she was not a submissive and weak woman at the mercy of people around her as was portrayed by him in the epic but was an agentic individual who though felt constrained by her familial relations did not wish to bow down to the frenzied pressure put by her mother when it came to choosing her future husband. Le Guin's Lavinia lets the wraith of Vergil understand that it was to seek help from the ancestral spirits through their oracles that she was in the sacred forest. In Le Guin's novel instead of the ancestral spirit Vergil appears in his spirit form to make amends with his unfulfilled, incomplete and unfinished character, whose foretelling of the future events turns out be the opening of another crucial agency in the form of numinous epistemology for Le Guin's Lavinia.

The Gift of Numinous Epistemology and Lavinia's Refusal to Marry Turnus:

With the knowledge of the future events foretold by the spirit of Vergil as an oracular voice through the forest of Albunea, Lavinia feels herself more confident as well as burdened with guilt: confident because she knew that she could escape marrying Turnus, the choice completely repulsive to her, but at the same time Lavinia feels burdened with guilt because she also knew that there was going to be a war, the war wherein all her suitors and many other countrymen were going to die when Aeneas the Trojan prince she was supposed to marry as foretold to her by Vergil arrives in Italy. However, Lavinia was aware that the war between the Latins and the Trojans was fated irrespective of her decision to refuse Turnus and that though she was the integral part of war, was not the cause of war, that the war would be instigated by those men anxious to prove their masculinity through violence and bloodshed.

Lavinia next lets her readers know about Turnus' formal request to marry her which sends Amata into feverish excitement. However, Amata also knew that Latinus would never impose his own or anyone else's will on Lavinia and therefore before Latinus could speak to his daughter regarding Turnus' marriage proposal, Amata calls Lavinia and tells her, though initially in a kind and appealing tone that "Among them all, all the young possibilities, there really is only one who is possible. Who is inevitable" (74). Amata does not stop only at that but goes ahead with her pleading, confiding in Lavinia her own passionate feelings about Turnus and also her already agreed upon agreement with Turnus. Amata tells her daughter:

'Oh, Lavinia, he will be kind to you, good to you. He is so fine – so handsome! There is nothing to be afraid of. And you can visit back here often with him. And I'll be welcome to come and visit you in Ardea – he said so to me more than once....He'll look after you as your father does. You'll be so happy there. You have nothing to fear. I will go with you.'(75)

Amata's passionate appeal when she speaks about Turnus indeed appears more like a girl talking about her own betrothed. Lavinia also lets her readers know that Amata was not only trying to retrieve one of her dead sons through Turnus but in her frenzied passion for Turnus was trying to make a family with Turnus where Turnus could be a father figure to Lavinia. In other words, Turnus was slowly becoming husband-son for Amata and this is where Lavinia knew that she had to oppose her mother. In fact, Lavinia lets her readers know that Amata had already falsely informed Latinus that Lavinia was in love with Turnus since he first came courting her and had warned him that as a timid virgin, she will not admit it. Lavinia thus in clear words lets her father know that she would "rather be a Vestal than marry any of those men" (77). Lavinia tells her readers that Vestal as per the culture followed by the pre-Roman society was a woman who chose to stay with her father's family and kept the hearth fire alight. Though Latinus understands her situation he also knew that not marrying was not an option for a princess who also was the only daughter of a king, the king who had to look for the most eligible suitor as his son-in-law who could be the next king of Latium. At the same time Latinus also knew that Turnus was being pushed vigorously as the only eligible suitor by Amata to get her own wish fulfilled. Latinus however feels helpless not to oppose Amata chiefly because among the suitors Turnus had, as Lavinia herself tells her readers, with the encouragement from Amata proved himself to be the most eligible suitor. Latinus thus tries to convince Lavinia that among the suitors there was no competition for Turnus, but at the same time lets Lavinia know his helpless situation brought forward by Amata. Lavinia describes to her readers her meeting with Latinus which clearly indicated his helplessness in the entire situation:

'She[Amata] tells me all the praises he[Turnus] sings of you. She believes he's so determined to have you that if I give you to one of the others, he'll rebel, despite this agreement they made. She may be right. He's an ambitious, self-confident fellow. But he has reason to be. Your mother has encouraged him. In fact, if you picked one of the others, she might rebel.' He tried to make it a joke, but it was not a joke and I could see misery in his eyes.(78)



Indeed, Le Guin's novel through Latinus' position as a patriarch points out that though belonging to dominant patriarchy and though known to be a powerful warrior king during his youth, Latinus fought those wars to buy an enduring peace and not to expand his territory. As a peace-loving king Latinus did not fit into the patriarchal script of gender attributes and thus though could easily have used domination or coercion against his wife as well as daughter in his capacity as a king as well as a patriarch, Latinus remains a kind and loving man who does not consider that expressing his internal anguish to his wife as well as to his daughter could make him look emotionally vulnerable and thus an unmasculine king. Le Guin's Latinus thus through his embodied performativity as a powerful warrior king who also remained loving, kind and emotionally vulnerable man challenges the stereotypical gender script of traditional patriarchy.

As her "father's daughter", a daughter who was deprived of mother's love very early in her life and who from her childhood was given the much-needed emotional support and love by her father, understands her father's predicament and knows that the only way she could avoid marrying Turnus was using her gift of numinous epistemology. Thus, when Lavinia feels herself compelled to make a choice of her future husband after the constant pressure from Turnus and Amata and realizes Latinus's inability to support her anymore to delay her betrothal, Lavinia first makes use of the recent incidents in the house such as swarm of bees around the summit of the great laurel tree in the house which was taken as an omen indicating arrival of foreigners on the Latin shore. Further, Lavinia also points out to Latinus another omen in the form of her hair catching fire during the ritual without harming her, which was interpreted by Latinus as Lavinia bringing glory as well as war to her people. By taking help of these omens Lavinia convinces her father to visit the sacred forest to seek oracle of his ancestors which could help him and her decide their fate.

Lavinia too accompanies Latinus in the forest and once again meets the spirit of Vergil for the final time who before returning to the darkness as a dying man narrates the entire war which was to happen between the Trojans and Italians to Lavinia. Vergilian spirit also assures to Lavinia that Latinus has already heard the prophecy of Faunus telling him "Do not let the daughter of Latium marry a man of Latium. Let her marry the stranger that comes that even now is coming. And the kingdom of her sons will be far greater than the kingdom of Latium" (95).

Prophecy of Faunas could not be refuted by Latinus, his people as well as Amata and Turnus, though of course Turnus and Amata rise in rebellion and as prophesied by Vergilian spirit to Lavinia suffer consequences for their nefas which in Latin meant, the unspeakable wrong. Turnus and his army of other suitors along with his supporters die in a war fought over days and Amata after realizing that she was losing her cause and also Turnus commits suicide. Though Vergil ends his epic at a bloodied war fought between Trojans and Italians, Lavinia, as promised to her oracular guide carries the narrative ahead. Lavinia not just tells her readers about her marriage with Aeneas, but also moves ahead and lets them know about his death after three years of their marriage as was known to her through her uncanny gift. Lavinia further tells her readers about Ascanius, Aeneas' son from his first marriage and his toxic warrior masculinity as well as Silvius, her own son's eventual rising as a warrior king who loved peace like his father and his grandfather. Lavinia further lets her readers know that it was through her gift of numinous epistemology that she could keep Silvius away from Ascanius' influence and raise him in the sacred forest instead of in Regia under the strict vigilance of Ascanius' dominant masculinity. Lavinia elaborates this further by telling her readers that when Ascanius began to use his dominance to keep baby Silvius with him in Alba Longa, the province from where he preferred to rule and wished to send Lavinia back to Lavinium, the kingdom founded by Aeneas and her, Lavinia knew that the only and the most effective agency available to her was to seek oracular help through which she could keep Silvius with her. Le Guin's Lavinia thus once again revisits the sacred forest, this time with her son Silvius and once again hears her poet's voice, though this time not in his spirit form, but only as a voice from the forest which spoke as if it was speaking to Aeneas. Lavinia describes her dream to the readers,

A voice near me, by my ear, an old man's voice, was speaking softly: '... your last child, whom your wife Lavinia will bring up in the woods, a king, a father of kings.' Then I had so strong a sense of my husband's presence, his physical body and being, with me, in me, as if I were he, that I woke and found myself sitting up, bewildered, in the dark, bereft. (267)

Though it was through poet's voice that Lavinia gets to know about Anchises' (Aeneas' father) advice to Aeneas, Le Guin's Lavinia in order to save Silvius from Ascanius' influence manipulates her numinal knowledge and succeeds in convincing Ascanius as well as her own people that as prophesied by the ancestral voice of Aeneas' father, she needed to raise Silvius in the woods and not in Regia. Indeed, Le Guin's Lavinia comes across as a woman who at no point of time surrenders herself to the dominance of those wishing to suppress her agency. In



fact, Le Guin's Lavinia lets her readers know that she never bowed to the dominance of anyone except that of her oracularly guided fate which cohered with her own will. Le Guin's novel ends not with Lavinia death in her bodily form, but as an unfinished character from Vergilian epic Lavinia tells her readers that her poet did not sing her enough life to die and thus only gave her immortality (286). As an immortal character or a spirit Le Guin's Lavinia changes herself to a bird, an owl who could go from Lavinium to Albunea on her own wings.

Conclusion:

Le Guin's revisionary novel works at two different levels. At one level it calls the spirit of Vergil, the author of the original epic not just to follow him blindly but to take him to task for doing injustice to the character who was portrayed without understanding her familial predicament. Le Guin's novel thus makes the marginal character as the first-person narrator of the revisionary text and also makes Vergil as the oracular voice from the forest of Albunea who not just prophecies for Lavinia but in his spirit form and through his intellectually invigorating conversation with Lavinia acknowledges his error in not recognizing her as a strong agentic woman. Instead of remaining silent and meek character as portrayed by Vergil in his epic, Le Guin's Lavinia debates as well as disagrees with Vergil and on most occasions, Vergil admits his inability to provide any satisfactory answers to her and thus accepts that he misjudged Lavinia without understanding her situation. Le Guin's Lavinia thus shows herself an agentic woman who was confident, strong-willed as well as a bold woman who knew about her uncanny gift and thus sought oracular help of the sacred forest whenever she felt the need to do so.

At the second level Le Guin's novel is about Lavinia's struggle to remain an agentic woman in the familial surrounding, which was a more challenging task for her. With an antagonistic mother who continued to blame her for the death of her two sons and a loving and caring father who though always remained supportive towards her, also felt responsible towards his unhappy wife, Lavinia knew that her childhood was different from others. However, instead of succumbing to the unwelcoming circumstances and thus considering herself as a victim of traumatic childhood, Lavinia learns to be an agentic individual even within the constraints of her circumstances. She uses silence and meekness as her strategies during childhood to avoid unnecessary wrath of her mother. In her later years, when Lavinia realizes her gift of numinous epistemology, her agency acquires a different meaning. By seeking oracular guidance through the sacred forest once again Lavinia is able to avoid the victimhood under her mother's irrational domination. The next victimhood that Lavinia avoids

is to be under the patronage of Ascanius, her stepson and also let him train Silvius, her son under his domineering toxic masculinity. Once again it is through her uncanny gift that Lavinia shows herself as an agentic individual who refuses to come under the toxic power of her stepson and instead through the oracular guidance raises her son in the woods. Le Guin's revisionary novel thus points out that one cannot talk about the prescriptive form of agency or subversive performativity because agency and subversivity vary depending on the context, the culture and the historical eras to name a few and thus what is called as an agentic performativity such as the one used by Lavinia might be repudiated as mythical superstition in some era.

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