Vision and Revision: Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* as a Feminist Retelling of Virgil's *Aeneid*

Insha Qayoom Shah

Abstract

Myths are traditional narratives borne of an oral culture. They gradually evolve into coded narratives serving as a normative veneer for androcentric societies, which define roles for men and women based on their gender. Consequently, myths are known to endorse gender hierarchies through underrepresentation or misrepresentation of females, often codified as inferior to men. The feminist revision of myths has not just reinforced the transformative power of the mythic tales but also discovered that the muted characters of the classical myths, like Briseis, Penelope, Helen, and Medea, among others, can be repositioned as powerful female characters in the revised stories. This is the backdrop in which the paper analyses Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *Lavinia* as a feminist revision of Virgil's epic rendition of the myth of Aeneas, the *Aeneid*. The article explores the feminist revision of the *Aeneid* while spotlighting Le Guin's attempt to provide an alternative history of Rome by tracing its origin through Aeneas' second wife Lavinia. I also focus on the novel's political and patriarchal undertones by highlighting the themes of war and violence in the contemporary context of ongoing conflicts across the world. A retrospective analysis of the novel portrays the ways in which the epic past in the *Aeneid* is reworked to subvert the dominant ideologies inherent in these myths.

Keywords: myth, revision, gender, patriarchy, war, women

Introduction

Myths are cultural narratives that hold a very significant position in terms of defining our relationship with the distant past. They exert immense power over the public mind or collective psyche of people sharing common roots. Besides providing explanations for incomprehensible phenomena, myths also function as tools of ideological interpolation to serve a particular politico-cultural and/or patriarchal agenda. As narratives passed down through generations, myths play a role in perpetuating the gender system and can assist individuals in either disregarding or accepting its inherent inconsistencies.[1] According to Kate Millett, mythology can be seen as a significant progression in the realm of propaganda, as it frequently relies on theories of origin to support its claims. The classical narrative of Pandora's Box and the Biblical account of the Fall are considered to be prominent myths in western culture.[2] Gerda Lerner too contends that women, who comprise half of the global population, were limited to being portrayed in myths and fables solely as "amazons," "dragon-slayers," and "women with magical

Insha Qayoom Shah is a Research Scholar in the Department of English, University of Kashmir. Email: inshaafreen17@gmail.com.

[1] Lillian E. Doherty, *Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 37.

[2] Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 51.

abilities."[3] In contrast, their real-life experiences lacked historical documentation, resulting in the absence of a literary tradition. However, multiple versions of myths exist, which can serve as reflections of varying perspectives and power conflicts within the system.

Consequently, myths offer the possibility of transformation over a period of time, thereby providing scope for various artists to question the norms and prejudicial impositions reinforced by the dominant patriarchal or elitist hierarchies in society. Julia Sanders emphasizes in *Adaptation and Appropriation* that:

> Mythic paradigms provide the reader or spectator with a series of familiar reference points and a set of expectations which the novelist, artist, director, playwright, composer, or poet can rely upon as an instructive shorthand, while simultaneously exploiting, twisting, and relocating them in newly creative ways, and in newly resonant contexts.[4]

Throughout history women have been excluded from the opportunity to express their narratives in written literature, so limiting their ability to provide a unique female perspective.[5] Exploring the transformative power of the myths for their revision, therefore, provides an inspiration to feminist writers to re-focus the original version of the myth for contemporary readers. Both ancient as well as contemporary retellers have freely altered the order of events in the mythological stories, the motives of different characters, and the point(s) of view from which they are told in order to invoke a wide range of alternate themes.[6] Feminist writers and their texts such as Margaret Atwood (*The Penelopiad*), Jeanette Winterson (*Weight*), Anita Diamant (*The Red Tent*), Christa Wolf (*Medea*), and Pat Barker (*The Silence of the Girls*) have made commendable efforts in re-interpreting and transforming classical myths by offering alternative viewpoints from a female perspective. American author Ursula K. Le Guin, in her 2008 novel *Lavinia* also reworks upon the famous myth of Aeneas, rendered in epic form by Virgil. Tempering the epic with the novelized form, Le Guin attempts to re-historicize the myth of Aeneas, which holds a magnanimous significance for Romans, to subvert some key issues glorified in the source text. The novel subsumes the central themes of the epic into a revised narrative operating within the history-fiction interface.

Lavinia: A Feminist Revisionary Novel

Virgil's *Aeneid* is a mythical epic holding unparalleled sway over Romans for the glorification of their national history. The epic was composed by Virgil in Latin between 29 and 19 BC, and is set in the mythical age of Homer. The *Aeneid* clearly resonates with the style, diction, and storytelling techniques of Homeric epics. Unlike Homer's *Iliad*, which is mostly revered only in terms of being a piece of brilliant artistic creation, the myth of Aeneas serves as a historical, political, and cultural document if considered from a broader perspective. Virgil's central

[3] Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 222.
[4] Julia Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 81.
[5] Carolyne Larrington, *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (London: Pandora, 1992), p. xii.
[6] Lillian E. Doherty, *Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), p. 19.

character Aeneas features in Homer's *Iliad* as a warrior who faces God-like Achilles in combat in Book XX. Aeneas, who is saved by Poseidon following the divine plan, is the sole warrior to escape Troy alive after the war. Woven around Aeneas' challenging journey and his establishment of a settlement in a foreign land, the *Aeneid* is not only a story about a displaced community, but the epic is deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness the Romans.

Le Guin's feminist revision of the myth relates the story of Aeneas from the moment of his arrival until his founding of the empire in Latium (future Rome) through the focus on Lavinia, the daughter of the native king Latinus. Being greatly influenced by the literary practice of second-wave feminists, who contest the representation of women in literary texts, Le Guin attempts to dig up the alternative truth from a known literary past and reweave it from the fresh perspective of a female character. Through the creative repositioning of her protagonist, Le Guin subverts the patriarchal underpinnings of the epic. Adrienne Rich provided the germ of such a radical revisionist agenda by defining the process of revision as:

> Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction-is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see –and therefore live –afresh.[7]

Rich's notion of revision undoubtedly acted as a catalyst for women writers to enable "the female to emerge as subject, in contrast to that characterized by a male-only perspective in which woman is either absent or is objectified by the male perspective."[8] The majority of Rich's poetry produced during the 1970s can be regarded as an exemplification of feminist revisionary efforts. Subsequently, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Hilda Doolittle's "Helen in Egypt", Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, and Christa Wolf's *Medea* are the initial valiant attempts to question the moral systems patriarchy has canonized.

The woman writers engaged in the process of re-visioning endeavours to recreate the symbolic representations in a manner that is novel and imbued with alternative meanings.[9] Le Guin's novel *Lavinia* is the story of a female mythic character, Lavinia, who is liberated from the baggage of muted representation in the *Aeneid*. Her character, which remains invisible in Virgil's rendition, can speak in the revised novel. Le Guin's reworking of the classical epic revalues the female presence in an androcentric text where speech is denied to women. Feminist critics have spoken against the erasure of female voices in literary texts and public discourse. In her introduction to *The Feminist Critique of Language*, Deborah Cameron observes:

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[7] Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1972), pp. 18–30.
[8] Beverly J. Stoeltje, "Introduction: Feminist Revisions," *Journal of Folklore Research*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1988), pp. 141–53.
[9] Susan Osborn, "'Revision/Re-Vision': A Feminist Writing Class," *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1991), pp. 258-73.

> The silence of women is above all an absence of female voices and concerns from high culture. If we look at society's most prestigious linguistic registers – religious ceremonial, political rhetoric, legal discourse, science, poetry – we find women's voices for the most part silent – or, rather, *silenced*, for it is not just that women do not speak; often they are explicitly *prevented* from speaking, whether by explicit taboos and restrictions or by the more genteel tyrannies of custom and practice.[10]

The reinforcement of female silence in patriarchal narratives like myths has a paralyzing effect on women's existence. Le Guin's text addresses the erasure of Lavinia's voice by giving her command over the narrative. Virgil renders Lavinia voiceless as her significance to Aeneas's heroic tale is not acknowledged, whereas Le Guin's novel is propelled by her feminist conviction that female characters ought to possess the agency to express themselves, and describe their individual experiences.[11] Lavinia is aware of both her curtailed role in Virgil's text and her effort in reinventing her role in the revised text, "I write, perhaps because the events I remember only come to exist as I write them, or as he (Virgil) wrote them. But he did not write them. He slighted my life, in his poem. He scanted me, because he came to know who I was only when he was dying."[12] Lavinia emphasizes Virgil's inability to acknowledge her existence; hence he "slighted" her life.

Virgil treats Lavinia as an ideal Roman woman who has the potential to sacrifice herself for the greater good of her people. Noted scholars like Crescenzo Formicula provide a detailed study of Lavinia's characterization in the epic. "The frail Lavinia shall learn abruptly and definitely from her relatives that she is to be the victim of sacrifice, which shall involve her on a spiritual and personal level, her family on a physical level, and her Fatherland on a political one."[13] Therefore, in the source text, Lavinia is designated as a commodity or a consignment to be delivered to the best man in the battle. Formicula also refers to the imposed passivity, the lack of agency, and the narrative purpose embodied in the neglected character of Lavinia in the epic. She writes, "Lavinia is a character without contour and without a past, she is the projection into the future; she does not belong to Turnus and not even to her mother, and above all, she does not belong to the present."[14] In Le Guin's revision, Lavinia reframes her present life by relating her part of the truth because she believes that "not even a poet can speak the whole truth."[15] Lavinia's aspiration to offer the whole truth clearly indicates her disbelief and distrust of the source text, which pushed her to the peripheries. Le Guin's creative protest through rewriting Lavinia's story "forms a literature of disbelief whose aim is to expose the sexism of the literary canon and its construction of cultural memory as 'false'."[16]

Le Guin's text fights Lavinia's exclusion by rewriting the literary past and providing Lavinia with a productive centrality in contrast to the muted marginality in

[10] Deborah Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 3.
[11] Deidre Byrne, "Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia*: a dialogue with Classical Roman epic", *English Academy Review*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2012), pp. 6-19.
[12] Ursula K. Le Guin, *Lavinia* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 2010), p. 3.
[13] Crescenzo Formicula, "Dark Visibility: Lavinia in the 'Aeneid'," *Vergilius (1959-)*, vol. 52 (2006), pp. 76–95.
[14] Formicula, "Dark Visibility: Lavinia in the 'Aeneid'", p. 92.
[15] Le Guin, *Lavinia*, p. 10.
[16] Liedeke Plate, *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 146.

the *Aeneid*. *Lavinia* as a feminist revision allows the central character to assume her role and develop a unique sensibility. Such revisions, as Peter Widdowson notes:

> Invariably have a clear cultural-political thrust, especially on behalf of those exploited, marginalized and silenced by the dominant ideologies, in demanding that the political inscription and cultural complicity in oppression of past texts be revised and re-visioned as a part of the process of restoring a voice, a history or an identity to the erstwhile oppressed.[17]

Le Guin's novel, therefore, is a revisionary response to the classical text, which preserves the patriarchal agency by enforcing silence as means of maintaining control over the oppressed. Her revised story is the personal expression of what Lavinia endures throughout her life, which pushes the story of Aeneas to the background.

Reconsidering Violence and War

Le Guin's novel transforms Lavinia, the marginal and the silenced, in the *Aeneid,* into a commentator of war. She is not a passive victim of the war but an active observer, yet a noncombatant who seizes an opportunity to narrate a war story. Upon reading the *Aeneid* in Latin, the author was intrigued by the details of the battle, wondering if there is a way to render them from the perspective of a female.[18] Consequently, Le Guin deliberately places Lavinia at the centre of the narrative to provide an alternative understanding of warfare from the perspective of a woman. Through Lavinia's focus on events, Le Guin not only criticises the enterprise of war but also re-examines the patriarchal hold over female experiences in war. Her creative endeavour relating the war story from a feminine standpoint seems closer to the device and driving motive of Miriam Cooke, who emboldens the same in *Women and the War Story*:

> It is not merely whim that drives women everywhere to claim their war experiences as combat. It is the growing understanding of the ways in which patriarchy seizes and then articulates women's experiences so that they will be seem to be marginal and apolitical that now drives women as creative artists and as critics to re-member their pasts and then to write them.[19]

Lavinia participates in war through experiencing it and, therefore, articulates those experiences from the dual position of a cause as well as a victim of war. She herself admits to being "nobody that everybody is fighting a war about."[20] Her version of war story is contrary to what Virgil's intended to achieve in the *Aeneid*. The real motive of Virgil in centering the second half of the *Aeneid* on war was to engage in "a particularly crucial and intractable aspect of it, ideas of the character and the importance of Rome's military."[21] What Virgil conceives as a narrative of

[17] Peter Widdowson, *Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 169.
[18] Tobias S. Buckell, "Ursula K. Le Guin: The Age of Saturn," *Locus Magazine*, 24 October (2008). At: http://www.locusmag.com/2008/Issue10_LeGuin.html.
[19] Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 5.
[20] Le Guin, *Lavinia,* p. 153.
[21] Katharine Toll, "What's Love Got to Do with It? The Invocation to Erato, and Patriotism in the 'Aeneid'," *Quaderni Urbinati Di Cultura Classica*, vol. 33, no. 3 (1989), pp. 107–118.

valorizing Roman national character is treated by Le Guin as a creative debate on the justifiability of war to maintain peace. Moreover, Le Guin incorporates war as a counter-narrative driven by the feminist urge to relate how women survive and endure the atrocities of violence. The inclusion of women in narratives of war serves as a means to highlight the inherent peculiarity of the persistent meta-narrative that has consistently characterised war stories.[22] In *Lavinia,* the arrival of Aeneas and his companions in a foreign land marks the beginning of their strife with the natives of Latium. For Latins, Aeneas is an invader whose Trojan identity poses a threat to their native tradition and agrarian society. Aeneas and the Trojans can be perceived as a destabilising force within a formerly tranquil and idyllic society rather than as its saviours.[23] Le Guin's Lavinia reverberates the same while describing the peaceful state of her homeland before the Trojan arrival, "Because we were at peace I could laugh at the Leapers, because we were at peace I could sleep alone in Albunea, because we were at peace my father saw no harm in it when more suitors for my hand began coming to the Regia."[24] Lavinia enjoys the harmony, being unaware of what destiny has in store for her and the people of Latium. Though King Latinus tries to form an alliance with Aeneas, Turnus' disregard for Aeneas leads to catastrophic events, already referred to by Virgil in the *Aeneid*.

In Book VII of the *Aeneid,* Virgil relates a prophecy according to which Lavinia would be the cause of war, "And it was read by seers to mean the girl/Would have renown and glorious days to come,/But that she brought a great war on her people."[25] Le Guin's Lavinia echoes a similar sentiment in the novel, "Like Spartan Helen, I caused a war. She caused hers by letting men who wanted her take her. I caused mine because I wouldn't be given, wouldn't be taken, but chose my man and my fate."[26] Although Lavinia admits to being a cause of the impending war between Aeneas's forces and the Rutuian warriors for the occupation of Latium, she does not glamorize warfare as her mother Amata, who views war as a necessity for attaining peace. Lavinia's version unveils the veracity that lies behind and contradicts the discourse of nationalism.[27] Her perspective on violence leads us to a new and alternative understanding of war and its aftermath. "I see a mass rape, women screaming and fighting as they are dragged off by warriors. I see great, beautiful ships with banks of oars, but the ships are all at war, some are burning. Fire and smoke rise up over the water."[28]

Le Guin makes Lavinia narrate the horrors of war but also to take an anti-war stand clear by emphasizing the necessity of maintaining peace. Before the commencement of the war she comments on the futility of war by referring to Virgil's epic, "The horrible list of carnage my poet had told me on the last night, that was what they were making ready for. But why, what was it for? For a pet deer? For a girl? What good would that be?"[29] Such questions are relevant in the contemporary world too. Some fictional scenes in the novel are quite reminiscent of the violence and bloodshed, taking place in the conflict zones of the world like Afghanistan,

[22] Cooke, *Women and War Story*, p. 43.
[23] James. E. G. Zetgel, 'Rome and its Tradition', *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. Fiachra Mac Gorain and Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 263-278.
[24] Le Guin, *Lavinia*, p. 33.
[25] Robert Fitzgerald, *The Aeneid* (New York: Vintage, 1984), p. 198.
[26] Le Guin, *Lavinia*, p. 4.
[27] Cooke, *Women and War Story*, p. 10.
[28] Le Guin, *Lavinia*, p. 26.
[29] Le Guin, *Lavinia*, p. 138.

Iran, Yemen, Palestine, and Ukraine. Lavinia relates, "My poet could tell how heads were split and brains spattered armor, how men with a sword in their lungs crawled gasping out their blood and life, how so-and-so killed so-and-so, and so on. He could tell what he had not seen with his mortal eyes, because that was his gift; but I do not have that gift. I can tell only what I was told and what I saw."[30] Therefore, the novelist successfully carves out some gruesome details of the war, which are akin to the contemporary reality of our times.

Le Guin's revisionary attempt makes the dominant discourse of the war in the *Aeneid* relevant to modern readers, who can easily associate the mythical war with the ongoing armed conflicts. For Lavinia war entails the destruction of life and the landscape of Latium. She provides an eyewitness account of the post-war destruction and tragic losses:

> From the farms and from the city people went out that afternoon and found their sons and fathers and brothers dead on the field. Some carried home the bodies of their dead to wash them and mourn them and bury them. Others made pyres there where they fell, so that evening all the fields north of Laurentum were clustered with fires, and smoke dimmed the stars. All the woodsmen in Latium brought wood in from the forests, and next day a huge common pyre was built outside the city walls for men who lived too far to be carried home for burial. It burned all day. Grief hung as dark and heavy in the city as the smoke.[31]

The inclusion of these post-war scenes in the novel depicts the human pain and suffering that people experience as a result of war. Le Guin, "examines the mind-sets of the common people who are victimised by a war that is being fought due to misunderstanding, greed, fear of otherness, and a willingness to use bulling and armaments rather than brains and diplomacy to solve problems."[32] She widens the thematic of the *Aeneid* from the deliberation on Roman concept of *gloria* and offers a new perspective on violence and the need for peace and security.

An Alternative History

In Virgil's the *Aeneid*, the three prophecies contained in Book I, Book VI, and Book VIII clearly predict the outcome of the war in favour of Aeneas. Aeneas' triumph over the native tribes of Latium marks the beginning of a new history culminating in the universal rule of Rome. In his postscript to the English translation of the *Aeneid*, Robert Fitzgerald voices Virgil's political purpose behind composing the epic:

> He (Virgil) re-created a Homeric hero in the Homeric age; he also deliberately echoed Homer in many details of narrative, in many conventions and features of style. But his purpose was totally un-Homeric and drastically original: to enfold in the mythical action of *The Aeneid* foreshadowings and direct foretellings of the Roman history, more than a thousand years of it between Aeneas and his own time.[33]

[30] Le Guin, *Lavinia*, p. 139.
[31] Le Guin, *Lavinia*, p. 155.
[32] Sandra J. Lindow, "Lavinia: A Woman Reinvents Herself in Fact and/or Fiction", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2009), pp. 221-37.
[33] Fitzgerald, *The Aeneid*, p. 405.

The epic valorizes the territorial occupation of Latium as well as the civil war as it forms a part of Rome's national history. It chronicles the history of early Italy and therefore, reinforces the spirit of nation and nationhood among the Romans that:

> there are frequent reminders of Rome's history throughout the poem. Even though the action of the *Aeneid* ends with Aeneas' killing of Turnus, it is Rome and its destiny that provide the retrospective justification for Aeneas' actions and sufferings Although Rome is not founded within the narrative of the poem, the creation of a Roman people and a Roman nation is its goal.[34]

Virgil traces the origin of the Roman Empire through the undisputed king of Latium, Aeneas who is fated to rule the people of both races –Trojans and Italians. His craft lies in combining the history of the natives with that of foreigners without complicating the establishment of Roman supremacy. Therefore, the 'truth' related by Virgil the *Aeneid* is an embodiment of the epic past and has largely been accepted as the accepted truth because of its historicity.

The epic past presented in the *Aeneid* has its basis in the quasi-mythological tradition and is preserved as well as handed down through generations as a part of national history. In *Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail M. Bakhtin highlights the impenetrable nature of the epic past, "One cannot glimpse it, grope for it, touch it, one cannot look at it from just any point of view; it is impossible to experience it, analyse it, take it apart, penetrate into its core."[35] By virtue account of its epic form and its content being nationally important, the *Aeneid* cannot be challenged or re-evaluated. Le Guin's revisionary endeavour, however, transmutes the epic into a novel, which enables her to re-historicize the mythical material into an alternative history. "Women have always made history as much as men have, not "contributed" to it, only they did not know what they had made and had no tools to interpret their own experience."[36] Le Guin's novelization of the epic as a feminist revision serves as a tool for the author to claim Lavinia's past from her lived experience. Novel as a genre, takes no note of the "absolute past", "tradition", and "hierarchal distance."[37] Therefore, Le Guin takes liberty with the myth of King Aeneas and provides autonomy to Lavinia by establishing her as the Queen of Rome.

Le Guin's *Lavinia* adds a new dimension to all the prophecies mentioned in the *Aeneid*. For instance, she provides her own interpretation of the Shield of Aeneas mentioned in Book VIII of the source text:

> But he cannot see what I see in the shield. He will not live to see it. He must die after only three years, and widow me. Only I, who met the poet in the woods of Albunea, can keep looking through the bronze of my husband's shield to see all the wars he will not fight. The poet made him live, live greatly, so he must die. I, whom the poet gave so little life to, I can go on. I can live to see the cloud above the sea at the end of the world.[38]

[34] Zetzel, 'Rome and its Traditions', p. 263.
[35] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 16.
[36] Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 166.
[37] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 38.
[38] Le Guin, *Lavinia,* p. 27.

Le Guin's narrative limits the role of Aeneas in the story by allowing Lavinia to decide her own fate instead of following Virgil's script. Aeneas' early death in the revised story provides her with a chance to transform into an independent entity. She develops into a strong-minded woman with an unwavering will to take charge of her life. Lavinia's perfectly developed inner voice helps her navigate the turbulence as she makes well-informed, emotionally-balanced judgments that ultimately win her the respect of society as a woman who deserves to be queen.[39] Le Guin's fictional innovation over Virgil's epic past establishes Lavinia as the protagonist with a parallel narrative symbolic of her own version of history.

Lavinia: Mother of Rome

Throughout the entire narrative, Le Guin projects Lavinia as a she-wolf because of her fierceness. Lavinia demonstrates her fierceness in protecting her son Silvius, when Ascanius wants to separate Silvius from her. She resists by refusing to keep Silvius in Alba Longa, "I'll go back to Lavinium willingly, gratefully. But not without Silvius."[40] Her refusal displeases Ascanius as Lavinia was "the she-wolf on the shield."[41] In raising Silvius in the forest she identifies herself with the "Mother-Wolf"[42] in the cave who always keeps guarding her children. Le Guin's deliberate use of the symbolic figure of Mother-Wolf for Lavinia is an allusion to the myth of Romulus and Remus, according to which they were suckled by a she-wolf. Both are believed to be the founders of Rome as they are descendants of Silvius and therefore, the ancestors of King Augustus. Her status as the mother (mother-wolf) of Silvius undoubtedly places her as the mother of the entire Roman state. Lavinia, according to Le Guin's revision, is the equivalent of Aeneas in terms of playing her role of both the father and the mother of Silvius. Such projection is suggestive of a matrilineal origin of the Romans and therefore highlights the historical importance of Lavinia in the foundation of Rome.

The characterisation of Lavinia in Le Guin's novel is in stark contrast with Virgil's muted Lavinia who lacks resolution because of her enforced destiny. Lavinia's silence regarding her own destiny reduces her to a liminal status in the poem, giving her a deferred presence when it comes to taking action but denying her the right to exercise agency.[43] By defying the narrow limits of her predetermined role, Le Guin endows Lavinia with a will to write an alternative account. Lavinia does not deny the source of her original existence, yet she makes her persona visible to modern readers by her conscious act of rewriting:

> I remember Aeneas' words as I remember the poet's words. I remember every word because they are the fabric of my life, the warp I am woven on. All my life since Aeneas' death might seem a weaving torn out of the loom unfinished, a shapeless tangle of threads making nothing, but it is not so; for my mind returns as the shuttle returns always to the starting place, finding the pattern, going on with it. I was a spinner, not a weaver, but I have learned to weave.[44]

[39] Lindow, "Lavinia: A Woman Reinvents Herself in Fact and/or Fiction", p. 222.
[40] Le Guin, *Lavinia*, p. 251.
[41] Le Guin, *Lavinia*, p. 251.
[42] Le Guin, *Lavinia*, p. 272.
[43] Byrne, "Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia*: a dialogue with Classical Roman epic," p. 10.
[44] Le Guin, *Lavinia*, p. 148.

The determination to weave her own story becomes a significant factor in defining her place in history of Rome. Lavinia's will to weave is symbolic of writing back to the source text in which she has a subliminal role. Le Guin clearly follows Helene Cixous's call to women:

> Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement. The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative.[45]

Le Guin's revisionary novel puts Lavinia "into the text" and "into history" by rewriting as well as extending the epic past of the *Aeneid* beyond its narrative limits. Lavinia's journey from being Latinus' fragile daughter to Aeneas' naive wife to a helpless widow to Silvius' resolute mother is full of hardships, yet she does not yield. Despite her young age, she establishes herself as a prominent figure in Roman society, embodying the idealised image of a woman during the Augustan era.[46] She revitalises traditional Roman customs and values, infusing them with a fresh vitality. Lavinia represents a harmonious blend of tragic and epic influences, inheriting the noble qualities of Eurydice.[47] Through her remarkable ability to shape her own fate, she contributes to the illustrious narrative of Rome's glorious history. She transcends her given role as an appendage of Aeneas and transforms into an entity by carving a significant place for her in the history of Rome.

Conclusion

The novel is the story of a reinvented character, Lavinia who undergoes a process of revision to assert her redefined identity by remaining within the confines of patriarchal myth, which is silent about her existence. The characterisation of Lavinia in Le Guin's novel is in stark contrast with Virgil's muted Lavinia who lacks resolution because of her enforced destiny. In Le Guin's version, Lavinia is not projected the blind follower of destiny but has been endowed with an agency to choose her spouse, out of her own volition. Her creative intervention introduces a new perspective by proposing that Lavinia's decision, driven by her emotions and intuition, aligns with the predetermined fate decided by the Gods.[48] Le Guin's feminist revision pits Virgil's authoritative voice against the voice of his own creation, Lavinia, who makes Virgil acknowledge his follies in leaving her characterisation as well as the epic unfinished. Her reinterpretation of a mythical epic in clearly modern political idioms such as political dominance and necessity of war shows that she has not just revised an ancient myth but has held it accountable for the contemporary human condition, which she alludes to being riven by

[45] Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1976), pp. 875-93.
[46] Formicula, "Dark Visibility: Lavinia in the 'Aeneid'," p. 95.
[47] Formicula, "Dark Visibility: Lavinia in the 'Aeneid'," p. 95.
[48] Byrne, "Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia*: a dialogue with Classical Roman epic," p. 15.

war and violence. The novel underscores the timeless potential of classical myths and seeks answers to a host of issues like the status of women, the patriarchal dominance of history and the distressing consequences of war. Le Guin draws attention to social and political concerns of antiquity that are buried in the mythology and are still relevant to the contemporary readers.