

Restless Female Ambition in Selected Autobiographical novels of Rebecca West

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Abstract

Rebecca West (1892-1983) uses the image of her restless, brave, female ambition as a sign of her heroine's desire to suppress what is forbidden. West through her autobiographical writings, emphasizes on forbidden issues as a disguise for her personal state. All fears, sufferings of her heroines are representations of West's own sufferings and this is revealed through certain depressed situations in her texts, exemplified in Adela, the heroine of West's incomplete work *The Sentinel*, Ellen Melville of *The Judge* (1922), and later Rose Aubrey of *The Fountain Overflows* (1956). In her literary works, West experiences losses when she lived with his beloved H.G. Wells, for ten years outside the scope of marriage and had a son who turned to be against her for not fulfilling the role of a mother. She experiments through her outrageousness because of the loss she sensed of her father and family's passion, then the negligence of her beloved led her aiming at explorations towards creating an image of a new kind of woman. Confessing agonies is important for freeing herself from such repressing, restless situations. After an abstract and introduction, the research paper is concerned first with a methodology presenting an analysis of West's problems, losses and miseries, including women's (mothers'), restless ambitions, then discussing *The Fountain Overflows*, followed by main conclusions then a list of references.

Keywords: Rebecca West, restless female ambition, mothers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Scott (1991) Clarifies the field in which Rebecca West was concerned with in her writings. She discusses the cultural dilemmas of the twentieth century in which West takes, suffrage, women's employment, sexual liberation, war and communism into consideration. West resisted the laws of patriarchy (Jardine 71-73).

The topics that are raised in her autobiographical writings are translations of her activities when she was a reviewer in *Freewoman* journal, and *Clarion* from 1912 on, she started writing and defending women's rights. Another topic is concerned with the relationship between Rebecca and H.G. Wells when Gordon N. Ray in his study entitled *H. G.*

Wells and Rebecca West (1974), admits that "Dame Rebecca's letters to Wells during ten years had been destroyed by him after separation" (p.1). West discusses autobiographical issues in her novels. Bonnie Kime Scott argues in *Selected Letters of Rebecca West* (2000, xv) that West "deliberately fashions her own biography": constructing versions of her parents' lives; pondering her lifelong rivalry with her authoritarian eldest sister; and taking issue with writers of the older generation—Wells, George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett—and with her contemporaries (see Harris, p.18). West faces difficulty in dealing with members of her family except her mother who tries always to support her and defend her.

According to Martin (2017, pp9-10), the writers, Rebecca West, Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf use experimental psychology theory which is liable to be applied on feminist issues. They have done so by sticking to psychological concepts to accept such liability of using model of mind in their novels that reveal women's style. While remembering their daily experiences of the past, they narrate them in their stories. Through stream of consciousness technique, these women writers were able to get rid of their past agonies through writing about them and confessing. Martin (p.10) adds that these women writers whose literary prose profoundly and persistently engage with the phenomenon of psychological sexual difference.

West started writing on the negligence she felt from her father who let his family in poverty, her two sisters who envied her intellectuality, even her beloved H. G. Wells whom they both had much to give each other. West was surrounded by the love and attraction of most of the critics and writers, and on the other, she was neglected by the ones whom she loved. Nobody had helped her (p44) "The men near you always hinder you". Those who were near her didn't help her. She is obliged to search for looking afar. Through the study of the works of western painters (Hamill, p.3).

The following part discusses West's ability in revealing the above-mentioned features of her heroine's ambitions and agonies as mothers and suffragette women. This part urges her to write in such experimental way out of her sufferings and the result is a creative, modernist style.

2. Problems with Maternity and Women's restless Ambitions in West's Novels.

In spite of the fact that Dame Rebecca had a special state, but she suffered a noticing loss. Rebecca suffers from many problems in her life. She has endless dreams and ambitions about herself as a woman and has written a lot about women independence and freedom in a patriarchal society. Being a clever, and an

ambitious woman, she suffered negligence from men specifically. Her father has not supported her intellectuality. On this subject, Laing (2006, p.170) claims that West through revising and repeating the same issue related to women clarifies the situation when women's repressed state are suppressed through remembering and revising. So, in the Modern texts, West revises her restless female ambitions as a sign of their desire to repress what is forbidden like for example, Ellen Melville in *The Judge*. She also overuses an image of mothers and their sacrificial situations. The image of restless mothers is always repeated in West's texts. Orel (1986, p.122) believes that West uses few characters in her novels and repeats them continuously in her stories. West concentrates on a model of a girl who cannot trust those who are close to her. Due to such betrayal cases, she is disappointed. Susan Stanford Friedman (1989) also discusses the repressed desires of such model of West's girls'. Friedman considers West's texts as disguises for such repressed state. (see Laing in Bernard Schweitzer (2006, p.170). This is what happens to Rebecca West, She has been betrayed after ten years of love with Wells though she knows that she has an affair with a married man, but his affair with another woman has injured her and shocked her.

One of the unfinished works written by Rebecca West is *The Sentinel*. It is about the miserable psychological state of women suffragists problems. The heroine, Adela Furnival, attempts to suppress all the agonies imposed on her by men. Actually, this act of suppression is in itself full of miseries and it hurts West personally. Adela's ambition is to urge women to respect their identities by having new identities different from the one imposed by patriarchal society. At the time she calls for women's freedom, she is depressed and forgets her own personal freedom. The suffrage movement calls for freedom and women's rights. But Adela's suppression of certain experiences doesn't refer or fulfill the suffragists' movements aims. Veseley in "A Psychoanalysis of Rebecca West's unfinished Novel the Sentinel" believes that "Rebecca

West was both a New Woman author and an active suffragist, creating several literary characters within this novel who were themselves suffragists" (2019, p.18). The New Woman genre "dealt frankly with sex and marriage as well as women's desires for independence and fulfillment" (Diniejko, 2011, n.p.). In spite of the fact that she aims at having freedom and independence, her independence does not bring her happiness. She has an affair of ten years with H. G. Wells but she suffers a lot from such affair. The consequences of this relationship results in hatred instead of love especially after giving birth to a son, he didn't accept her as a mother and criticizes her of being unfaithful mother.

This process of dissatisfaction motivates women to have new experiences opposite to what the patriarchal society imposes on them. The sexual relationship outside scope of marriage which brings loss and misery to West and all her heroines are translations for new experiences that William James (1890) adopted as important because "Experience is remolding us every moment" (p. 334). So, the new sexual relationship though brings misery and critical notice for an individual like West, it becomes a part of or a response to such losses though refused by society. "Our Mental Reaction is the result of our experience" adds James. Adela's case is an ironic situation, because as a suffragist, she is calling for women's rights and their freedom whereas in her teenage, she had a sexual affair with Neville, she does so without having feeling of love, the strange thing happens when Neville tells her that he is ready to marry her but she refuses. Adela suffers from self-delusion because she lets everyone believe in her courageous trials of achieving success as a suffragist whereas personally, she is disappointed when she remembers all these years of sexual affair with Neville but doesn't accept to marry him. In page 28 of *The Sentinel*, Adela confesses that her past sexual appearance becomes an inner suppression that encourages her to think for helping women to be free (*The Sentinel*, p.28). West is expressing herself through Adela, for she had an affair with H. G. Wells, the married man, for ten years and the result of their love was their son.

West loved Wells but Adela suffers from a self-deluded state. Her sexual encounter is what William James referred to as a remolding experience which carries with it a message to all women, to be themselves and confess their doings in a depressed society. The memories of the past and the experiences of these women become a part of their fixed identity. What is clear in West and all of her heroines cases, is that in spite of the miserable conditions they face in their lives, they never give up trying to defend their identities and depending on themselves in refusing the injustice that the patriarchal system obliges them to accept.

West's *The Judge* is about remembering. The heroine, Marion remembers her past and the difficult, miserable moments she suffered. There are certain incidents in which Marion remembers miserable moments that trigger her. Among them, is her affair and past experiences as a mistress and also her shamed unmarried mother who is a victim of marital rape: Ellen, who remembers her dead mother and her mother's neglect at the hands of her father. The character Richard in the novel, remembers his mistress and also his mother. There is strong autobiographical reference in the novel when West portrays the suffragettes through the heroine Ellen. This is biographical note of West herself who was a suffragette and she had an effective role in presenting women's agonies and defending them. In page 10, West again through her female heroine Ellen who has a school fellow named Rachael Wing and has similar intention of suffragette state that "for she too was a suffragette and a socialist at the great nine-foot wall round Lord Wemyss's estate, by which they were to cycle for some miles". West through the mouth speak of her heroines and mothers reveals her own ambition and focuses on their successes in pages 14-15:

It was true that she was an excellent shorthand-typist, but

she vexed the decent grey by her vividness. The sight of

her through an open door, sitting at her typewriter in her

blue linen overall, dispersed one's thoughts; it was as if

a wireless found its waves jammed by another instrument.

Often he found himself compelled to abandon his train of

ideas and apprehend her experiences: to feel a little tired

himself if she drooped over her machine, to imagine, as she

pinned on her tam-o-shanter and ran down the stairs, how

the cold air would presently prick her smooth skin. (The Judge, pp 14-15).

In this passage West concentrates not only on Ellen's success and ambition in her work, but also the process of remembering is evident in West's text while her characters have more ambitions: She cries honestly, "I'm so dull that I'll die. You and Mr. James are awfully good to me, and I can put up

with Mr. Morrison, though he's a doubted old thing, and I like my work, but coming here in the morning and going home at night, day in and day out, it drives me crazy. I don't know what's the matter with me, but I want to run away to new places and see new people" (The Judge, p.15). West portrays an image of a woman who is able to develop her ability in working, seeing new places, learning new tasks and reaching a respectable state accepted in the society. Though she faces difficult situations in her life, as a daughter to a negligent father, or as mother not able to let her son to accept her motherhood, or as a faithful woman to a lover who betrays her, she never hesitates in renewing her energy to be herself and to have an independent personality.

Throughout her texts, West focuses on the necessity of women to raise their intellectual aspect by working hard, seeing the world and new places. In her autobiographical writings, West conveys her losses and keeps urging

women to start again renewing their efforts for brighter future.

Rebecca West in her incomplete early novel *The Sentinel*, states that, "when the Suffragette went out by the door the stones began to come through the window" (*The Sentinel*, p223). This is true and Rebecca West herself though once she didn't want to have a clash with the police when as a suffragette she was calling for women's rights, two policemen had pulled her coat and she was able to get released from them leaving her coat in their hands. (See Rebecca West's memories).

Antonia Till (1992, pp17-59) claims that *The Sentinel* was immediately compelling, initially for its resonances with some of Rebecca West's earliest writing. The subject matter and the heroine's name coincided with the unfinished piece *Adela*, attributed to West and published posthumously (Laing, Xiii). These were the first clues to the real identity of the author.

This subject is repeated throughout West's autobiographical novels. Unfortunately, other people didn't support her to achieve her ambition towards progress in her intellectuality. West confesses that her father had avoided and neglected her mental life. West, through the comments of characters in her novel *The Judge*, reveals the image of a miserable woman who are unable to stick to their ambitions. For example, the character, Mr. Philip in page 17 in the novel says: "when a woman did anything for itself, and not for its effect on the male, it seemed to him a proof of her incapacity to look after herself" (*The Judge*, p.17). Laing (2006, p.174) claims that the narrative of *The Judge* opens with depiction of a restless heroine, Ellen, whose ambitions are frustrated. West portrays Ellen as a woman who is struggling for having an independent personality. This image of an active woman with ambition is ironic with the image of a woman that fulfills the patriarchal system.

In *The Judge*, West focuses on "work and family, courtship and marriage, and motherhood and female sacrifice (Paxton, p.190). Actually, Rebecca West's stories are full of betrayal and sad experiences. For

example, West narrates how the character Marion had been betrayed by her lover and also by her mother and aunt as well. Marion has an affair with a man who betrays her and she becomes pregnant. Then he leaves her. Her mother and aunt want to solve her problem by obliging her to marry her neighbor and in this way Marion will be accepted in the society. Instead of supporting and helping Marion in her miserable life, because she becomes pregnant, both her mother and aunt plan to convince her to marry Peacy to solve her problem (illegitimate pregnancy state). Her mother and aunt believe that, it is necessary for a woman to be accepted in the society and for Marion, marrying Peacy is a best means for being accepted in a patriarchal society. West in her novel *The Judge*, states “It comforted her to believe that by merely being a wife she had fulfilled a function pleasing to God and necessary to the existence of society” (*The Judge*, p.225).

In the final part of *The Judge*, Ellen decides to sacrifice herself by becoming a mother. According to Peter Keating, this end is allegorical of “West’s disappointment with the legacy of sexual liberation and her ambivalence about motherhood” (Keating, p.166). What had happened to West after being with H. G. Wells ten years and having a son from him without marriage had affected her in a negative way. West is much disturbed by Well’s wife and his affair with another woman who tried to commit suicide, this led West to separate from him. Her son was against her. She faces difficult situations and being hurt a lot. So William James’s hypothesis that “Experience is remolding us every moment” is clearly applicable on West. Every miserable moment in West’s life becomes an experience that identified her personally.

3. The Fountain Overflows: An autobiographical story

The Fountain Overflows is an autobiographical story about Rebecca West’s family. In this novel, Rebecca West manipulates issues about Art represented by a

story about a family of three sisters and a brother. Their mother is fond of music and expert in playing on piano. West portrays their mother in a perfect way. She is hard working, kind forgiving mother. Her daughters are named Cordelia, Mary and Rose who takes the role of the narrator, and Piers, the journalist is their father, who is interested in politics (Maitzen, p.2013). He is not successful in his job, such interruption and failure of achieving success in his work affects his family. Andrea Barret in an essay published in *The New York Times Book Review* entitled as Rebecca West claims that “In this rich, insightful novel, Rose Aubrey recounts her childhood as a member of a remarkable but impoverished family in turn-of-the-century England. Rose and her twin sister, Mary, are being trained by their frail, eccentric mother to be concert pianists. The twins and their beloved mother look forward to a time when the two girls will lead exciting lives as professional musicians. Meanwhile, Rose and Mary’s adored younger brother, Richard Quin, progresses promisingly with the flute. Rose’s pretty, snooty older sister, Cordelia, however, has no artistic talent. Her mother and the other children realize this, but Cordelia does not”. Clare, their mother is a pianist. Her family has roots in this career but due to her sickness, she couldn’t continue as a pianist, but insists on teaching her children how to be a successful pianist. There are two important points in this novel. The first is about a family whose mother has major role in motivating the whole members to work and accomplish their duties in an exact way. She is referring to West’s mother. The other point is concentration on Arts and here the role of music. The mother’s role is far more active and superior to father’s role though the system is patriarchal. Rebecca in many of her works referred to the importance of the existence and role of the mother in our life. In an article written by Margaret Diane Stetz, who mentioned Rebecca’s short story “Elegy” which is published in 1995 about women’s laughter and loss. West criticizes with laughter, the effect of the patriarchal society on women and the generative role of women in the same society. This story of west again is about mother’s ambition as a woman. Concentration

is on her for she represents West's mother and her endless ambition to encourage her children to try their best to improve their skills in playing piano. There is an embarrassing, sensitive situation related to one of female characters. Cordelia, in *The Fountain Overflows*. It conveys a message for women's ambitions on one hand and the role of Art in human being's life. Music, here, plays an active role in showing the ambition of women artists, women musicians, which definitely refer to West's mother who was a pianist and her family was famous in this field. Rose in the novel, clarifies that there is a plot related to one of sisters, who is Cordelia's wishes to play the violin, but unfortunately, she hasn't ability to be a violin player. In West's novel, *The Fountain Overflows*, "Rose does not realize She had a true ear, indeed she had absolute pitch, which neither Mamma nor Mary nor I had, which was a terrible waste, and she had supple fingers, she could bend them right back to the wrist, and she could read anything at sight. But Mamma's face crumpled, first with rage, and then, just in time, with pity, every time she heard Cordelia laying the bow over the strings. Her tone was horribly greasy, and her phrasing always sounded like a stupid grown-up explaining something to a child. Also, she did not know good music from bad, as we did, as we had always done". (*The Fountain Overflows*, p.14) Cordelia faces another problem: "But Cordelia has no musical gift at all," said Mamma. "She couldn't tell the difference between Beethoven and Tchaikovsky" (*The Fountain Overflows*, p.70). In the same page, the narrator discusses that "Had the spirit of music appeared before her, it would have spanked her for there was nothing, absolutely nothing, in her performance except the desire to please. She would deform any sound or any group of sounds if she thought she could thereby please her audience's ear and so bribe it to give her its attention and see how pretty she looked as she played her violin" (p.70).

A real pathetic situation occurs when Cordelia's mother rejects the appearance of Cordelia to play violin in a concert in a Christmas day: "Cordelia should not play at

this sort of concert. She should not play at any concert. She cannot play the violin." She checked herself. Cordelia could not hear her, but she could not bear to say the words which she thought, did Cordelia hear them, would break her heart. "She cannot play the violin well enough yet to make a public performance anything but a farce. Of course she may improve, oh, yes, we hope she will improve," she went on, in a tone which would have been recognized by the most complete stranger as proceeding from the extremity of despair. "And what we must do is to raise her standards. If she is to be carted about to concerts and banquets where people who know nothing about music clap their hands because she is a beautiful little girl, she will never learn" (*The Fountain Overflows*, pp128-129).

West's heroines are really suffering and trying to stick restlessly to their ambitions. They never hesitate in doing so. Cordelia's mother in an objective, stern, frank way faces the difficult situation that her daughter cannot play violin but she never gives up the idea that she will try to help her. So, this is the new image of an independent successful woman who never gives up a chance of progress and development of her state as a New Woman. "What is music about," Rose asks Mary near the end of the novel. "Oh, it is about life, I suppose," answers Mary, "and specially about the parts of life we do not understand, otherwise people would not have to worry about it by explaining it by music." Rose and Mary — and, in her own way, Cordelia — are part of this cerebrally artistic world, but another fascination of the novel is that they are nonetheless children, and the novel also evokes the child's world of imaginary animals and perverse adults who refuse to treat children as whole people.

The Fountains Overflow is apparently autobiographical. West in page (8) writes:

Suddenly Mamma laughed. "Why should it have been pulled down? You are so gloomy about everything except the future of copper mines." "Copper will come right in the long run," said Papa, cold with sudden anger. "My dear, you must not mind what I say!" she protested. She and I looked at him anxiously,

and after a minute he smiled. All the same, he then glanced at the clock, and said that it was time he was getting back to the station, if he were to catch the six-o'clock train to Edinburgh; and the light had gone out of him, he had that shabby, beggar look that even we children sometimes had to remark in him. Tenderly Mamma told him (*The Fountain Overflows*, p 8)

West had portrayed her mother in a very lovely way, she is a kind mother and wife, trying to lessen the agonies of her family, she is convinced with the least things in her house, but her husband is so gloomy. Again after few pages, the narrator Rose states: "It really was cruel that we had to play the piano as well as do so much, that Mamma had to go shopping and help with the housework and deal with Papa's worries so that she was never composed and dressed like other mammas, that we had to go to school and always struck our teachers as careless and hurried. Yet it was piano-playing that set our accounts right. For though there was red hair in Papa's family, there was not a shred of musical talent, and we would rather have been musical with Mamma than have red-gold curls and make utter fools of ourselves by playing the violin as Cordelia did" (*The Fountain Overflows*, p.13).

West's presents an image of a sacrificing mother like this woman and she focuses on the endless efforts women have in their families for pushing for better results on all levels, economic, educational, social, in West's autobiographical texts there is an endless and continuous restless female ambition which is applicable on West herself. West's description of a failure of mothering, from nurture in the womb to the meeting of spiritual needs, is another significant investigation of maternal space on West's part. West wished to have a normal mothering role towards her son but she didn't succeed. Circumstances were against her.

Conclusion

West's novels are calls for the past. The reader is introduced to details and credible

views about life. The process of remembering is controlling the process of narration. The female characters in all of these autobiographical novels remember what their consciousness urges them to realize agonic situations. Politics, social status and women rights are repeated all over West's novels through their narrator's speeches or her female heroines. West revises a portrait of a woman with her harsh experiences at the hands of a husband. She presents a picture of powerful women of suffragette. The theme of motherhood is central due to West's beautiful image of her sacrificing mother. These women heroines whether wives, daughters or mothers are all portrayed in a vital and lovely way. The image of unmarried mother is repeated due to her own personal portrait as a mother and as an unmarried woman and her suffering of a neglected beloved with no sympathy. These women have really restless ambition but are also angry mothers. West's novel *The Judge* is written as an allegory of the first and second wave of feminism. The idea of travelling away from home and towards exile is objective if the traveler realizes the positive aspects of his or her exile and gains an independent identity. West throughout all her journeys round the world gets benefit to form her powerful personality in spite of all the miseries she faces.

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