

Equilibrium to new equilibrium: A study on Rebecca Ross's *The Queen's Rising* through the lens of Todorov's narrative theory

Hemalatha S. and Ramya Niranjani S.*

Abstract: All human beings seek a balanced life in the world which is achieved when one undergoes various stages in life from either equilibrium or disequilibrium. The transition from equilibrium to disequilibrium plays an intrinsic role in the personal growth of humans. Tzvetan Todorov, a Bulgarian literary theorist, proposes the narrative theory of fantasy to explore the stages of equilibrium in fantasy and other genres. Narrative theory provides a lens to discover how narratives play a major role in blurring the boundary between fantasy and reality. His theory enriches the perception of literature as an artistic expression and an impression of the human quest for balance. This theory is a systematic study to analyse the structure, organization, and meaning of literary works that reflect the complexities of life. Rebecca Ross is an American young adult fantasy writer whose writings explore the journey of young adults who face the challenges of the equilibrium theory and transformations in the world to achieve harmony in life. This research article analyses Rebecca Ross's *The Queen's Rising* (2018) through Todorov's equilibrium theory. The novel is set with the characters having an equilibrium stage of life, hindered by disruptions that transform them as they progress with the restoration of harmony and purpose in their life. Her narration reflects how the characters travel through various phases of life, crossing impediments to attain a balanced life through self-realisation and resilience. It shows how Ross's novel spotlights the narrative construction in terms of emotion and moral growth. It exemplifies the narrative structure that bridges the gap between the real and the unreal.

Keywords: Rebecca Ross, Todorov, equilibrium, disruption, recognition, resolution, new equilibrium

* Hemalatha S.; Ramya Niranjani S. (✉)

Department of English, Sri Sarada College for Women (Autonomous), Salem (Tamil Nadu), India

e-mail: hema99940@gmail.com (corresponding author)

Introduction

Every individual strives to lead a balanced life in the world. Literature guides human beings to explore this equilibrium and helps them navigate life's complexities through engaging stories. It provides various narratives to analyse characters' difficulties amidst mixed emotions and challenges in their journey. Literary works offer escapism and thought-provoking ideas of reality to equip readers to trace possible ways to acquire a harmonious life to survive with equilibrium. Gerard Genette, a French literary theorist argues that literary discourse is "produced and developed according to structures it can transgress only because it finds them, even today, in the field of its language and style" (quoted in Howard 1973, 8). According to him, literary texts are shaped by the former works which overlook the cultural and literary landscape and transgression is an act of being creative to redefine literary works. The term 'narratology' is a translation of the French word 'narratologie' coined by Todorov in his work *Grammaire du Décaméro* which refers to the "structural analysis of narrative" (Prince 1995), and it is defined as "the study of structure in narratives" ("Narratology" *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). Other terms like "narrating, narrative, narratable, narrativity, tellability, narrative text and story" (Zupan Sosič 2022, 5) came into existence during the second half of the twentieth century. Roland Barthes, a French literary essayist and critic states that "there are countless forms of narrative in the world" (Ibid.) in his *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* and this statement extends the boundaries of the narrative.

Narratology is a powerful tool that helps the readers understand the art of storytelling and interpret and engage effectively with the text. A narrative is a way of thinking or exploring the experience of human beings and conveying a particular concept or idea with the general laws of nature. It engages them in meaning-making processes and helps them fix a literary work within its context. Theories based on literature and culture have asserted culture as a central element for narrative, which makes the readers understand what is happening around them and their perceptions by comparing the circumstances and events in the text. Narrative theory is flourishing in North America, Canada, the U.K., France, Germany, Scandinavia, Belgium, Israel, and China. This narrative theory provides "a well-structured, systematic theoretical approach and an elaborate set of analytical categories and models for describing narrative phenomena, roles and effects" (Zupan

Sosič 2022, 7) to literary studies and other disciplines. This paper examines how the narrative theory of Tzvetan Todorov is applied in the construction and conveyance of meaning in Rebecca Ross's *The Queen's Rising* (2018).

It is not the story but how it is told matters a lot for grasping the readers' attention. Fantasy novels that connect the ordinary and the extraordinary, the authentic and the exotic, the usual and the unusual always find their place in the readers' hearts. They have a specific capability to bridge the gap between the routine and the magical by blending the familiar and the fantastical. Either in one's own life or someone's life people face realities all the time in their day-to-day life which sometimes makes them feel exhausted and look for something to elude, to restore their positivity. Humans encounter countless challenges in the real world often making them weary and yearning for something in their life. But when the same realities are portrayed with a mixture of magical elements, they create a sense of hope and positivity in their minds by offering alternative realities where the impossible becomes possible.

Todorov's narrative theory

Todorov, a Bulgarian-French historian, philosopher and literary structuralist of the twentieth century has written *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. He is famous for his theory on narrative, and genre analysis which influenced the development of literary studies in the late twentieth century. He has made essential contributions to structuralism and poststructuralism. He develops "a typology of narrative structures based on the relationship between the story, the chronological sequence of events and the discourse, the way the story is presented" ("Tzvetan Todorov | Literary Theory and Criticism Class Notes | Fiveable" 2024) This has created a lasting impact in the field of narratology. He emphasises that "the dynamic and dialogical nature of narrative" (Ibid.) influences cognitive development and rhetorical storytelling approaches. His contributions insist on the ethics and value of literature and remind us that literary study transforms individuals and society.

Todorov's narrative theory focuses on three types of equilibrium such as equilibrium, disequilibrium, and new equilibrium. He believes the narrative view is possible "by assessing the movement of a story from a state of Equilibrium to Disequilibrium" (Ott 2019 par. 1). He states that there are five essential elements to analyse equilibrium

theory, “equilibrium, the breakdown (disruption), recognition of the loss of equilibrium, the successful search (restoration), the re-establishment of the initial equilibrium” (Todorov 1971, 39). He believes that the primary function of the narrative is “to solve a problem” which possesses a “cause and effect format” and the characters in the novel travel through a “series of linear events in chronological order” (Charlottelee 2018). His study shows that narrative is circular and not linear which has multiple attempts to restore equilibrium and the characters transform during this progress when facing disruptions apart from the ordinary societal events. His theory is a simple versatile tool to understand narrative form by providing a clear framework to analyse the structure of the text which helps to understand the characters’ motivation during their journey. It emphasises the importance of the problem and the solution to grasp the tension, desire and fears. This article explores Todorov’s stages of narration with Ross’s construction in terms of setting, plot, characters’ development, the portrayal of power, resilience, identity and transformation and provides various insights and themes of the contemporary world. According to Jonathan Culler, a literary theorist, “literary study relies on theories of narrative structure: on notions of plot, of different kinds of narrators, of narrative techniques” (Culler 2011, 84) and the stories “make sense of things, whether in thinking of our lives as a progression leading somewhere or in telling ourselves what is happening in the world” (Ibid., 83).

The Queen’s Rising

A young adult fantasy writer Rebecca Ross’s *The Queen’s Rising*, inspired by Renaissance France, is an epic debut fantasy and a testament to the development of characters. She creates flawed and relatable characters possessing their secrets, ambitions and fears which are a deliberate approach to an engaging narrative through the characters’ growth. Each character’s toughness of spirit is revealed throughout the novel. In an interview with Jean Book Nerd, Ross acknowledges “I really wanted to create characters who were flawed and relatable. I wanted them to have desires, secrets and fears. I also wanted to make sure they were not the same people they were at the beginning of the narrative” (“Rebecca Ross Author Interview” 2018). This signifies that Ross is determined to make the characters undergo certain circumstances to make them grow and to stand in the hearts of the readers forever.

Ross creates a fictional world comprising four countries, namely “the island of Maevana to the north, Grimhildor to the far frozen west, Valenia and Bendecca to the south, the ocean breaking them into three pieces of mountainous lands” (Ross 2018, 56-57). All these countries have a king’s rule, whereas the Maevana, which consists of fourteen houses, has a system of a queen’s reign, as Liadan Kavanagh, the first queen of Maevana, commands, “that no king shall sit upon his throne unless the queen and people choose it to be so” (Ibid., 375). This command establishes a new tradition that portrays women as empowered and enhances their leadership qualities. Her narrative style is thought-provoking where her world with matriarchal rule in Maevana juxtaposing the patriarchal system of Grimhildor, Valenia and Bendecca helps to explore leadership and tradition significantly.

First stage of equilibrium

When the novel begins, though Maevana and Valenia have had huge conflicts in the past, they mutually depend on each other for a harmonious relationship. This interdependence between the regions reinforces the idea that assortment in strengths and opinions is significant for the survival of the people and prosperity of the country. Ross maintains the state of balance or equilibrium while she introduces the protagonist, Brienna, a young girl of age ten and the other major characters, such as Cartier Evariste, Brienna’s tutor and Merei Labelle, Brienna’s friend. Ross in an interview with Janet says:

I wanted Valenia and Maevana to have a striking difference between them, as this is mirrored in Brienna, since her heritage is split between the two countries. I wanted it to be evident that honoring the passions really enabled Valenia to progress, while Maevana was stuck in the dark ages, floundering beneath a king that should have never taken the throne. I put a channel between them to help physically separate them in reader’s mind. (“Meet... Rebecca Ross!” 2017)

Brienna is brought up by her grandfather as she loses her mother and her grandfather hides the truth about her father to protect her from the dangers associated with her lineage and the political unrest in Maevana. Brienna joins the Magnalia House, the house for the girl children in Valenia to master one of the five passions: art, music, dramatics, wit and knowledge. The ardens (students) have to be there for seven years and at the end of the seventh year, they will get their patrons after being examined. Brienna shifts her passion from art to music, dramatics and wit for the first four years as she struggles to find

her own passion and finally seeks the tutor Cartier to make her “a mistress of knowledge in the three years” (Ross 2018, 21). Todorov’s first stage of equilibrium is evident in the setting and the initial journey of Brienna in the Magnalia House with ardens, tutors and their close-knit environment.

Second stage of equilibrium

As the plot continues, Ross makes the second element, disruption, find its way into the setting and characters’ lives. Firstly, the peaceful realm of Maevana is disrupted when the Maevan Queen gets “slain” and there comes “the end of an era” (Ross 2018, 84). Though Maevana has no queen to rule, it is always seen as the queen’s realm, which stirs the anger of one of the kings of the fourteen houses, Lord Guilroy Lannon. He belongs to the house of Lannon the Fierce, whose name sounds like three things: “greed, power, and steel” (Ibid.). He kills people who stand against him, “men and women—*children*—cut to pieces at the footstool of the throne, fingers and tongues, eyes and heads” (Ibid., 216). He becomes the king by joining hands with his supporting house, “Allenach the Shrewd” (Ibid., 152), whose king is Brendan Allenach, the biological father of Brienna. Ross exposes the autocratic rule, arrogance, inhuman and illogical aspects and happenings of the political world through King Lannon.

Secondly, in the Magnalia house, supernatural occurrences through ancestral memories tied to Maevana’s ancient magic cause chaos in the mind of Brienna. She hears an unknown voice saying, “My lord? My lord, she is here to see you” (Ross 2018, 67), which disrupts her preparation for her solstice. When she opens Cartier’s *The Book of Hours*, a Maevan tale, she senses “the hands of a man, broad and scarred, with dirt beneath her nails” (Ibid., 69), and the next moment she realises that she is “no longer stood in Magnalia’s hall” but in the “corridor built of stone and mortar” (Ibid.). Thus, she is transported from reality to supernatural scenes, which are not just abstract, as she experiences them vividly as if she is living through them herself. Lee Roy Beach, an American psychologist defines narrative as “a rich mixture of memories, of visual, auditory and other cognitive images, all laced together by emotions to form a mixture that far surpasses mere words and visual images in their ability to capture context and meaning” (Beach). The revelation of the intense traumatic events of the past, which blurs the line between the past and the present,

overwhelms her and makes her feel physically exhausted and mentally anxious.

While she is still in the land of confusion, a series of disruptions follow the life of Brienna. In the summer solstice, the Dowager, the head of the Magnalia House, invites patrons of the five passions to examine their ardens and award them with impassionment and cloaks. She invites Brice Mathieu and Nicolas Babineaux to examine Brienna's passion, unfortunately, after her performance, she appears "uneducated to Mathieu and inexperienced to Babineaux" (Ross 2018, 118), which makes her stay there in the house until her tutor Cartier finds her the right patron to test her passion. The ardens, after receiving their cloaks, depart from the Magnalia House to pursue their future and travel a clear path. This farewell isolates Brienna and creates anxiety about her uncertain situation without a patron to support her future. The ancestral memories and alienation that occur in her life shift her from the stage of equilibrium to the disruption or disequilibrium.

Third stage of equilibrium

One cannot be in the stage of equilibrium always. Disruption is a part of life that everyone has to cross by understanding and realising that one cannot stay in the state of disruption forever and there must be a way out if one looks for it. The human mind has the potential to find a way to solve any sort of issue once it recognises the root of the problem. Todorov's third stage is recognising the disruption beyond the hesitation and acknowledging them through reality or fantasy. Recognition is the crucial stage where the characters identify the cause of their suffering. Brienna perceives her identity after meeting Alderic Jourdain, who wants to adopt her as his daughter. She also unravels why she gets the ancestral memories and grasps the purpose behind them. In the novel, Brienna realises that she has "dual citizenship" (Ross 2018, 26) through her grandfather's letter. She identifies the true identity of Alderic Jourdain as David Macquinn, the king of one of the fourteen houses in Maevana, waiting for "Twenty-five years, with a last name that began with M. A man who desired to see Lannon obliterated" (Ibid., 210) and his motive to discover the missing magical elements "the Stone of Eventide" and "the Queen's Canon" (Ibid., 85). Brienna realises the "drop of history, painfully lost, which should, of course, be recovered if possible" (Ibid., 153) and Jourdain's need for her assistance to recover these elements through her inherited

memories to dethrone King Lannon and to set back the queen's realm in Maevana. The cruelty and the harsh rule of King Lannon make her realise the importance of helping Jourdain in his mission to protect people from him.

Fourth stage of equilibrium

Todorov's fourth-stage resolution signifies the shift from the state of disequilibrium through the stability of the characters after recognising the disruptions in their lives. In this pivotal moment, the characters transform to restore balance from the preceding disruptions. During this phase, they adapt, overcome and rebuild their lives with resilience and wisdom. It paves the way for re-establishment and development of the individual. In this stage, Ross brings out the coexistence of fantasy and reality to resolve the conflicts and regain the ways to achieve normalcy. Brienna realises that "procuring the stone and reviving magic is the most peaceful route to justice" (Ross 2018, 216). So she decides to restore normalcy in Maevana by entering the country as an adopted daughter of David Macquinn during the autumn hunt, which shifts her journey from Valenia to Maevana. She faces many inner conflicts when she recognises her real identity when she meets King Brendan Allenach, her biological father, as a supporter of King Lannon. She struggles in the political intrigues of the kingdom, as chaos arises in her to support either "the one bound by passion or the one bound by blood?" (Ibid., 368). The resolution stage becomes crucial when she stands between her blood father Brendan Allenach and her adopted father Alderic Jourdain. Even though Brendan Allenach tempts her that he will make her the queen of Maevana, Brienna chooses to stand for what is right and takes a resolution to help Jourdain, and decides to "gather on ancient ground, a place of magic and queens and sacrifice" (Ibid., 342) to oppose her father in the battlefield. Brienna's decision to move to the northern region proves her willpower and inner strength to face adversities without fear. She chooses her patron instead of her father to obtain justice for the people of Maevana. After facing many struggles in Maevana, she discovers the missing element "the Stone of Eventide" amidst the forest and "the Queen's Canon" (Ibid., 85) in the castle of Brendan Allenach, which helps them to capture King Lannon and put him on trial to give him the appropriate punishments for his cruelty. She plans intelligently to protect the magical elements with the utmost care and render them to Isolde Kavanagh who is the rightful queen of Maevana. In this stage,

the supernatural elements resolve the conflicts that occur in the second and third stages of equilibrium.

Fifth stage of equilibrium

Todorov's fifth-stage of equilibrium is the restoration of a new and balanced equilibrium. In the setting of the new equilibrium, Brienna achieves her goals by facing every obstacle with bravery and finally attains success through her dual identity as a daughter of Maevana and as a resilient Valenian. The novel enters a new equilibrium and Isolde Kavanagh, "with her voice sharp and rich in the air" (Ross 2018, 396) points out King Lannon as "an imposter" (Ibid., 396) to the Maevan throne. She confronts him with all the other fallen houses and tends to claim Maevana from his "unrighteous hands" (Ibid., 369) and she demands to "kneel before her" (Ibid., 418) and "lie prostrate" (Ibid., 419) to imprison him to decide his fate in front of her people. The novel concludes with Brienna's state of unwinding her "stories of bravery and stories of fear, stories of desperation and stories of redemption, stories of loss and stories of reunion" (Ibid., 423), and finally she receives her cloak from her tutor Cartier after all the struggles and victory. The novel ends as Brienna states that she is "going to build a House of Knowledge" (Ibid., 438) in Maevana. Finally, Ross develops a new equilibrium to restore the normalcy that existed at the initial stage of the story. Brienna revives equilibrium by facing conflicts and political issues through her self-development and impacts her world with positive hope for the future. Thus, Ross ends her story with a sense of new balance in the journey of Brienna.

Conclusion

The narrative excellence of Ross plays a major role in influencing the response and interpretations of the readers by offering emotional engagement, cultural, social, and historical contexts, character development and tools to dissect the intricacies of storytelling. Her compelling narratives create an emotional engagement with the characters and aid in exploring the universal themes of identity, belonging, resilience and self-discovery. She provides structural insights into the construction, interpretation and organisation of stories, consisting of the setting, characters, point of view, themes, and plot through which she makes the readers appreciate and understand how narration is the foundation strategy to connect the fundamental elements of human experience like time, action, and transformation.

Through her narrative ability, she attracts a huge audience by equipping them with a massive appreciation for the artful narration and its vigour to inspire and transform them for a better life.

This article argues that Ross's construction of her novel *The Queen's Rising* goes hand in hand with Todorov's narrative theory of equilibrium. It demonstrates how disruptions and restoration shape storytelling and human experience. It provides the perspective that every existence begins with either equilibrium or disequilibrium and the disruptions that occur in the middle help individuals to identify the challenges and overcome them with a positive outlook. It also aids humans in identifying their strengths and the potential to leap over the walls. It allows individuals to defeat their anxiety, challenges and hurdles with fortitude. She highlights the fact that disruptions are the opportunities that life offers individuals to get better at life's crucial challenges and shape their lives with hope. She emphasises the benefits of perseverance and adaptability in dealing with adversity. Thus, Ross prepares the readers' minds to face life's complexities. The characters come out of the shadows, move through the grey of self-doubt, step into the light of clarity and thus create hope by making one believe Todorov's theory that if there is a disruption, there will also be a new equilibrium in transformative ways. Ross's novel by adhering to this theoretical framework becomes a source of inspiration to accept the transformative journey of life and view complexities as stepping stones to create a better future.

References:

- Beach, Lee Roy. 2010. *The Psychology of Narrative Thought: How the Stories We Tell Ourselves Shape Our Lives*. Bloomington, Indiana: Xlibris.
- Charlottelee, 2018. "Todorov's narrative Theory." *Charlotte's Media*. June 1. <https://charlottelee2017.wordpress.com/2018/02/19/todorovs-narrative-theory/> [accessed: 12.10.2024].
- Culler, Jonathan. 2011. "6. Narrative." In *Oxford University Press eBooks*, 83–94. <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199691340.003.0006>
- Howard, Richard. Translator. 1973. *The Fantastic A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. The Press of Case Western Reserve University.
- "Meet... Rebecca Ross!" 2017. *My Book Abyss*. December 19. <https://mybookabyss.com/author-interviews/rebecca-ross-the-author/meet-rebecca-ross> [accessed: 14.10.2024].
- "Narratology." In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/narratology> [accessed 29.11.2024].
- Ott, Sarah. 2019. "Week 3: Narrative Structure Analysis (Looking at Todorov's Method through Shrek)."

- <https://sarahottdigitalstorytelling.wordpress.com/2019/02/13/week-3-narrative-structure-analysis-looking-at-todorovs-method-through-shrek>
- Prince, Gerald. 1995. "Narratology." In *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, 110–30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/chol9780521300131.007>
- "Rebecca Ross Author Interview." 2018. *Jean Book Nerd*. <https://www.jeanbooknerd.com/2018/05/rebecca-ross-author-interview.html>
- Ross, Rebecca. 2018. *The Queen's Rising*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- "Tzvetan Todorov | Literary Theory and Criticism Class Notes | Fiveable." 2024. <https://library.fiveable.me/literary-theory-criticism/unit-2/tzvetan-todorov/study-guide/cibr7ZBSjVEoCyWF>
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1971. "The 2 principles of Narrative." *Diacritics* 1 (1): 37–44. www.davidbardschwarz.com/pdf/todorov.pdf
- Zupan Sosič, Alojzija. 2022. "A Theory of Narrative." Translated by Helena Biffio Zorko. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/resources/pdfs/978-1-5275-8778-6-sample.pdf>