

REFLECTING ACTIVISM IN THE POETRY OF ADRIENNE RICH

Dr. Rana Zaidi

Professor, H.O.D, School of Languages, Jaipur National University, Jagatpura, Jaipur

Beena Arya

Research Scholar, Jaipur National University, Jagatpura, Jaipur

Abstract - Poets of Adrienne rich's caliber are seldom the subject of scholarly writing because of the plethora of concerns that arise from their notoriety and the breadth of their oeuvre. Several of the squabbles in contemporary feminist literary criticism may be settled by reading Adrienne rich's poetry. To illustrate how rich's poetry brings together apparently contradictory perspectives on the topic of women's writing, we will first describe the two perspectives. Adrienne rich: a poet's life and work, themes in poetry and prose on the importance of writing and art in her writing, the private and the communal brew together in an explosive brew. She draws inspiration from her struggles to write visionary, activist, revolutionary, and radical feminism in her poems.

Index Terms - Poetry, Adrienne Rich's, Work, Feminism and Power

INTRODUCTION

Among her many accomplishments, American Adrienne Cecile Rich was a poet, writer, and feminist. To her surprise, she received a call "'one of the most widely read and important poets of the second half of the 20th century," and "the oppression of women and homosexuals to the forefront of literary debate," to quote one critic. Rich argued against extreme feminism and celebrated what she called the "lesbian continuum" of female solidarity and creativity that shapes and enriches the lives of women. Iconic poet W. H. Auden chose her first book, *A Change of World*, as the winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize. And then Auden wrote the book's preface. As a well-known act of protest against House Speaker Newt Gingrich's move to defund the National Endowment for the Arts, Rich famously turned down the National Medal of Arts.

The late poet and writer Adrienne Rich was widely regarded as one of the most influential thinkers in the United States during her lifetime. Rich's career, which has lasted seven decades, has been widely read and enormously influential, and it has closely followed the history of post-war American poetry. Her earlier work, such as *A Change of World* (1951), which received the renowned Yale Younger Poets Prize, was stylistically accurate and decorous, but her later work, particularly from the late 1960s and early 1970s, was more radical in both free-verse form and feminist and political themes. Seen as a "polite copyist of Yeats and Auden, wife and mother," Rich's transformation was summed up by Carol Muske-Dukes in the *New York Times Book Review*. She began her life as a young widow and jaded formalist, but she has since become a spiritual and rhetorical convalescent, a feminist leader, and the doyenne of a freshly constituted female literature. Her poems from the '70s and '80s are foundational reading for second-wave feminists. When she passed away in 2012, she was widely regarded as a leading figure among American poets.

Rich's work has dealt with identity, sexuality, and politics since her first collection of poetry, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954–1962*, was published in 1963. Her formally ambitious poetics have mirrored her pursuit of social justice, her participation in the anti-war movement, and her radical feminism. In an effort to include what would be considered "non-poetic" language into poetry, Rich has used open forms that incorporate the cadences of common speech, enjambment, and irregular line and stanza lengths. During the turbulent time of the Vietnam War, Rich wrote politically involved poems, and her book *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972* (1973) received the National Book Award for Poetry.

Rich's writing embodies the voice of a woman who has dedicated her life to historical study, women, literature, and the pursuit of happiness "Actual, current recollection; her own unique, personal history. The combination of Rich's natural talent and relatively original views with her unwavering tenacity and action made her a feminist and pro-lesbian movement icon, as well as an artistic and poetic legend, revered by many fans throughout the globe.

RICH AS POET

Throughout her body of work, a progressive evolution of vocabulary and form is shown across collections of poetry. She started out with the traditional inaugural form and text that was both personal and metaphorical in tone, emulating the style of the poet W. H. Auden. Later in life, she found her voice as a reformer and began to speak out on matters of social justice, charitable giving, and, most importantly, pacifism. Early on in Rich's life, tragedy struck when her husband committed suicide, and then again when Sylvia Plath took her own life at the age of 30. She was bringing up three kids on her own while also writing poems and struggling with feelings of parental desertion. To add insult to injury, she then found out that her favorite poet, Anne Sexton, had died at the young age of forty-six. Despite being a former fashion model, having no formal education, suffering from mental illness, and spending much of her time at home, Sexton was her favorite poet.

Rich's hopes were dashed when she learnt of Sexton's death, and the suicide of her husband, just after the birth of their third child, left her feeling betrayed and abandoned. In the latter 1960s, Rich's health began to decline due to issues including rheumatoid arthritis and macular degeneration, both of which made it difficult for her to see, read, and carry out everyday tasks. Rich spent her whole life attempting to understand the complexities of poetry and the perspectives of others on the topic. She read *How Are Poems Made* many times. This is packed with ideas and observations on the relationship between art and politics. Possibilities exist that Rich has read sections along the lines of "To comprehend the social command correctly, a poet must be in the center of objects and happenings. Rhythm is the lifeblood, the vitality, of poetry. You can only discuss it as you would electricity or magnetism.

THE LIFE AND WORK OF ADRIENNE RICH

Biographer Hillary Holladay writes in her book *The Power of Adrienne Rich* that Rich had an "excruciatingly advantaged" upbringing. In her article titled "The Distance Between Language and Violence," writer Adrienne Rich discusses the psychological and physical effects of childhood trauma brought on by unrealistic expectations. My parents require a perfectly developing child, evidence of their intelligence and culture. I'm kept from school, taught at home till the age of nine. My mother, once an aspiring pianist and composer who earned her living as a piano teacher, need not—and must not—work for money after marriage. Within this bubble of class privilege, the child can be educated at home, taught to play Mozart on the piano at four years old. She develops facial tics, eczema in the creases of her elbows and knees, hay fever. She is prohibited from confusion: her lessons, and accomplishments, must follow a clear trajectory (265).

Hence, Rich's dilemma stemmed from the emotional scars she had from a childhood marked by her father's fixed plan to raise a genius and her mother's neglect. Her father's first intention upon her birth was to bestow glory onto her. So, a few days after baby Adrienne's debut, her father Arnold Rich wrote to his father-in-law "Miss Rich is progressively gaining a human aspect. I have no doubt that she will grow up to be a lovely young lady, and I pray that we can do you proud. A lot of people think she was born bilingual in Greek and Spanish and with a highly developed talent for the piano, but I can tell you that such rumors are much exaggerated (Holladay 32). Readers may see that, despite the letter's humor, the writer is serious about determining her own destiny. Rich acknowledges that her father was a passionate and difficult figure, but she also acknowledges that he was instrumental in her early and subsequent writing successes. Because of his domineering nature, she will suffer in the future. Rich's main struggle is to find her own identity apart from her dominating and patriarchal father, who wants her to become a genius to satisfy his ego and who also wants her to distance herself from her Jewish heritage.

Rich concedes that she did not rebel since she enjoyed writing and found a solution to her internal battle over whether to pursue a career in music or literature. According to Rich's biographer Hilary Holladay (*The Power of Adrienne Rich: A Biography*), Rich dreamed that her piano transformed into a poetry writing table, solidifying her resolve to focus on writing rather than music. Even though Rich laughed at the notion of prophetic dreams, it was a crucial indication for her

ADRIENNE RICH'S POETRY AND PROSE THEMES

Feminism

Starting in the 1970s, Rich's poetry and prose increasingly addressed societal concerns relating to gender and sexuality. Nowadays, she is most well-known for her more explicitly political pieces such as *Diving into the Wreck*. All of her writings, whether poetry or prose, had some kind of feminist message. Rich called herself a "radical feminist" and utilized her writing skills to make political remarks. Reflecting on a "wrecked" contemporary society, the poems in *Diving into the Wreck* and *Dream of a Common Language* highlight the persistence of inequality at all societal levels, particularly gender inequality. Poetry that actively highlights and promotes women's tales and experiences while fighting for their equality is what Rich's poems advocate for. When she won the National Book Prize for her novel *Diving into the Wreck*, she insisted that the prize be split among the three women who had also been nominated for it (herself, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde).

LGBTQ Advocacy

Rich stated that her lesbianism had been dormant in her since she was a teenager, and she publicly announced her acceptance of the lifestyle in the late 1960s after her divorce from her husband, who committed suicide. Her writings later expanded to include a focus on LGBTQ rights. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" is perhaps the most well-known work arguing that society has wrongly believed for too long that heterosexuality is the desire of most women. Rich poses the intriguing possibility that heterosexuality serves as another kind of patriarchal control. What if all sexes "originally lead toward women" while looking for love and tenderness? Rich posits that patriarchal mechanisms that oppress women may be the driving force behind the widespread erasure and neglect of lesbian experience. Her later poetry and nonfiction work consistently reflect these concerns, and up until her death in 2012, she was an outspoken advocate for social justice.

Collective Action

Several of Rich's poems emphasize the importance of group effort above individual initiative in effecting political change. The title of Rich's book, *A Dream of a Common Language*, alludes to this idea that poetry might serve as a bridge for people from different backgrounds to communicate and arrive at a shared understanding of the truth. Rich argues that poetry has the power to open one up to the reality and experience of others. It may signal a "we" in which the reader feels involved while yet relating personal experience. Poems like "Diving into the Wreck" use this rhetorical device to draw the reader into the poet's journey of self-discovery and change, and ultimately to take political action.

The Role of Poetry/Art in Society

Much of Rich's poems center on the idea that poetry and art may be used as a powerful tool for bringing about positive social change. Reading a poem, she argues in "Someone is Composing a Poem," is neither passive nor like watching a show. Poems are not "managed and geared to affect popular opinion," but rather, they are more nuanced and subtle. For the reader to discover what moves them, a poem must provide an open environment. By doing so, the reader becomes an integral part of the poem, which may be especially powerful in the case of poems like Rich's, which aim to encourage political action.

Received History and Erasure

Articles like "Compulsory Heterosexuality" explore, more generally, what sorts of tales get told and what don't throughout history. Readers who, like Rich, have works "in which our names do not appear," are encouraged to read "Diving into the Wreck." According to Rich, politics have always been present in history since the narrative is written by the powerful and leaves out the experiences of the oppressed. In "compulsory heterosexuality," she discusses the erasure of lesbian history, and in "Diving into the Wreck" and other poems, she discusses the erasure of women's history. Rich contends in her writing that we can only comprehend the present if we challenge the accepted knowledge of history and bring hidden histories into the light.

Power

A key theme of Rich's work is the examination of power, both in terms of its historical effects on society and its potential future use by marginalized groups like women and LGBTQ people. Rich writes on "the black birds of history" in his poetry "In Those Years," describing how they flock together to do harm while others turn a blind eye. We may infer from her other themes that the "black birds" she describes are not secret societies of bad individuals, but rather, social forces like patriarchal norms and capitalist decision-making that prioritizes profit and power above human rights and fundamental decency. Rich's goal is to help people who have been historically powerless come to terms with their mistreatment at the hands of those in positions of authority and to begin to understand the sources of their own potential power, both collectively and individually.

Love

The passionate feminism and critical examination of social norms in Rich's writing has made her a household name. Yet, Rich is also a poet of love, and in her writing, love and desire serve as a powerful antidote to gloom. The portion of her book titled "21 Love Poems" is headed "The Dream of a Universal Language." There's one in particular where the speaker confesses to her lover, "I dreamt you were a poem," before going on to describe how she wished to share the poetry to her boyfriend. Poems foster closeness between author and reader, even in a society where inequality is on the increase and authority is often abused. In this way, they are analogous to a courtship or love affair, or, more accurately, a love affair may be seen as a poetry, as a connecting experience.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE AND ART

To be "white and middle-class into a home full of books, with a father who pushed me [Rich] to read and write," as Rich put it in one of her articles, was a blessing. Rich says that for almost twenty years, her work was subconsciously directed at her father's approval or disapproval. Nevertheless, he was a pivotal figure in Rich's life and career, and her work would not be the same without his influence. Yet at the same time, he set a lot of restrictions that Rich found so intolerable that she eventually had to breach them:

My personal world view was shaped in part by the poetry I had read, a poetry written almost entirely by white Anglo-Saxon men, a few women, Celts and Frenchmen notwithstanding. Thus, no poetry in the Spanish language or from Africa or China or the Middle East. My personal world view, which like so many young people I carried as a conviction of my own uniqueness, was not original with me, rather, my untutored and half-conscious rendering of the facts of blood and bread, the social and political forces of my time and place

Rich's father, Shakespeare, and William Blake all had a profound impact on her, and she came to believe that every woman is unique and remarkable in her own way. Women's intelligence, insight, and other strengths were seldom discussed, though. For a long time, Rich was perplexed by the notion of the "unique lady," which served as a complex web for her literary expression. What baffled her even more was an unusual sense she felt deep inside herself: a kind of worry that everything she would conceive of, create, or make would always be studied and evaluated by a Man. That Guy, who was he? Any male, whether a poet, critic, professor, parent, friend, or acquaintance. This would include every single male on the planet. Rich's creative expression was stymied by her belief that she was only imitating "the greats" rather than really creating anything new since she was using patterns and systems developed by men and writing in a language created and controlled by males.

Later, she recognized that the drive to imitate sprang from her subconscious want to win over this Guy rather than from any genuine interest in pursuing her own goals, expressing her own creativity, or experiencing creative pleasure. Rich writes in her article "When Us Dead Awaken," that the most remarkable aspect of A Room of One's Own was Virginia Woolf's style of storytelling and the hidden message she hid in the spaces between her sentences. According to Rich's analysis, the author made a concerted effort to make each and every one of her statements come off as detached and introspective. Woolf spoke directly to the female audience, urging them to engage more with literature. So, Woolf hoped to encourage women to begin reclaiming the space in literature and literary creation from which they had been historically excluded owing to a variety of social and economic constraints.

Woman's language, or more accurately, typical forms of self-expression, may provide an inexhaustible source of feminine power, no matter how difficult the road of discovering one's own means of expression may be. Women may now speak their language openly without the shame of borrowing or stealing men's possessions, and they can stop pretending to be "special" and just be themselves. Specifically, this is addressed in the 1951 poem by Rich titled "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" A woman who is fluent in her artistic medium establishes her identity and her connections to the male-dominated society via her work.

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,

Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.

They do not fear the men beneath the tree;

they pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's finger fluttering through her wool

Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.

The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band

sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie

still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.

The tigers in the panel that she made

will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

Despite the obvious dominance of her husband, as shown by "The huge weight of Uncle's wedding ring!" she manages to keep her cool. Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand," the poet's unwavering imagination and her work seem to be indestructible and able to overcome any hardship. "Tigers demonstrate the qualities that Aunt Jennifer must suppress or conceal in her everyday behavior: strength, assertiveness, fearlessness, fluidity of motion,"¹⁹ wrote Thomas Byars in one of his articles. ~ An ancient Roman adage, "vita brevis, ars longa,"²⁰ which translates to "life is fleeting, art is everlasting," is also shown here. Likewise, the "tigers" may also represent words, musical notes, dancing routines, or photographs; in other words, creative expressions that continue to exist long after their creators have been forgotten. Rich demonstrates the durability of poetry by using her own tiger, the poem, and hints that "art is a vehicle for personal immortality."

FEMINIST THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE POETRY OF ADRIENNE RICH

IS A PEN A METAPHORICAL PENIS?"

As it pertains to the metaphor of literary fatherhood in patriarchal Western society, Gilbert and Gubar's query is one of the most striking first phrases in feminist literary criticism. This metaphor suggests that the author of the book is a parent, a procreator whose pen has reproductive power similar to that of a man's penis. More than that, the might of his pen (and his penis) allows him to produce a progeny to which he may lay claim. Because of this, the pen is indeed mightier than its phallic equivalent, the sword "In the same way that a monarch (or a parent) 'owns' the adoration of the present, so too does the writer captivate the attention of the future. No sword-wielding commander could reign so long or control so wide a realm."² This makes the author/father the rightful ownership of the text's themes and the reader's attention, "like his heavenly counterpart, a father, a master or ruler: the spiritual type of a patriarch, as we interpret that word in Western civilization." Where does this patriarchal philosophy of literature leave women? Gilbert and Gubar claim that they are excluded: "As Otto Weininger put it in the eighteenth century, "woman has no stake in ontological reality," which is seen as a direct contradiction to the assumption that male sexuality is inextricably linked to the aggressive presence of literary power.

However, as we will see, the paternity/creativity metaphor implies that women exist exclusively to be acted upon by males, both as literary and sensuous objects, in order to perpetuate the male lineage and perpetuate the creative process." Margaret Atwood, in her article *Paradoxes and Dilemmas, the Woman as Writer*, discusses the pervasive image of a woman writer established by so-called phallic critics, which is in line with the view articulated "We observed multiple examples of reviewers recognizing an author as a 'housewife' and thus discarding everything she has created. When a male writes about mundane tasks like cleaning the dishes, critics call it realistic; when a woman does, they call it an inconveniently sexist trait."

The questions that Adrienne Rich posed in her poetry serve as a stumbling block to all of these debates. Do women speak a separate language? Could biological or cultural factors explain why women and men seem to write differently? Is it true that simultaneous occurrences of distinctly gendered bodily experiences create such discourse? French feminist literary theorist Luce Irigaray disagrees with Gilbert and Gubar's pen metaphor, favoring instead the image of two lips speaking in unison. I agree with Irigaray that the pen metaphor can be sexist, but I worry that the emphasis on "concentric" discourse rather than "phallic" discourse introduces a gender polarity that is difficult to distinguish from the male chauvinist alternative.

Several of the conflicts in contemporary feminist literary criticism may, I believe, be resolved by reading Adrienne Rich's poetry. To illustrate how Rich's poetry brings together two apparently irreconcilable approaches to the subject of feminine writing, I will focus on the features of both Anglo-American and French feminist literary theory that, in my view, bring out the difference most clearly. *Feminist Critique in the Wilderness* is an article written by the author. Showalter, a leading figure in Anglo-American feminist literary theory, distinguishes between two distinct schools of thought when discussing the topic of feminism in literary criticism. The first is the feminist critique, which provides feminist readings of male texts with the goal of challenging gender stereotypes. This method, in her view, is restricted since its global applicability is predicated on masculine critical theory. As a result, she suggests a new approach to feminist critique called gyno criticism, which would create new models based on research into women's lives and serve as a framework for analyzing women's literature. Mary Eagleton defines a 'gynocritic' as follows:

1. The feminine phase – when women hid their identities behind male authors and apprentices, who they imitated in their writing (for example, George Eliot)
2. The feminist phase - It lines up with the growth of suffragettes. Anger over inequality and a need to show parity define this period.
3. The female (ideal) phase – This began when women started writing about their own lives and ignoring the male-dominated society.

Showalter is exclusively focused on the female gender; in her view, women are distinct individuals who actively advocate for their rights as biological beings.

CONFLICT AND IDENTITY IN ADRIENNE RICH'S LIFE

Hillary Holladay, in her biography *The Power of Adrienne Rich*, describes Rich's upbringing as "excruciatingly privileged." In her essay "The Gap Between Language and Violence," Adrienne Rich discusses the psychological damage she suffered as a consequence of unmet expectations:

My parents want to see that their knowledge and culture have paid off with a fully formed offspring. I was homeschooled from the age of nine years old. After getting married, my mom, who was a piano instructor and wanted to be a pianist and composer, didn't need to and shouldn't work. The youngster may get a private education inside this privileged class, learning to play Mozart on the piano by the age of four. She has eczema in the folds of her elbows and knees, ticks on her face, and hay fever. There is no room for ambiguity in her education or career advancements; she must pursue a direct path (265).

Because of her mother's emotional distance and her father's fixed goal of creating a genius, Rich's childhood scars became a source of tension as an adult. Her father had always intended for her to inherit greatness from him. Arnold Rich, Adrienne's father, wrote to his father-in-law a few days after the birth, saying, "Miss Rich is progressively adopting a human aspect." She seems like she's going to turn out to be a lovely young lady, and I pray that we can do you proud. I can tell you firsthand that the rumors you've heard about her being born bilingual in Greek and Spanish and with a well-developed talent for the piano are much overstated (Holladay 32). Despite the letter's humor, the writer's will to plot her own destiny is clear. Although her father may have been responsible for some of Rich's early and ongoing writing success, she now freely acknowledges that he was an intense and difficult figure. She would pay for his authoritarianism later. Rich's dilemma is on her struggle to forge her own identity apart from her dominating and patriarchal father, who wants her to become a genius to satisfy his ego and who also wants her to distance herself from her Jewish heritage.

SAUSSUREAN CONCERNS

Both structural and post-structuralist poetics reduced literature to a side street off the main drag of critical theory, or they mined it for insights and utilized them to illustrate their theories, thereby making literature subordinate to philosophy. It is necessary to study literature for its own sake, for its effectiveness and worth, and to criticize the Barthesian and Derridean in the process. Because of this, the method cannot be reductionist or assimilationist. Of course, the challenges associated with language, meaning, and importance still need to be distributed and clarified, as they always have. Instead of being parasitical and using the humanities and literature in particular to fatten theory, theoretical discourse can help us gain clarity when interpreting literary works.

Most modern critical discourse deals with concerns of race, class, and gender, yet if the language of a literary book was as self-referential as poststructuralist theory implies, then literature would scarcely be a location for such exploration. There has been a growing consensus that literature serves a higher function than being an object of theorizing, with the latter serving primarily as a tool for creating paradoxes and showing off one's intellectual dexterity. More and more people are of the opinion that conventional syllabus formulations are outdated and that attention should instead be paid to a pluralism that acknowledges the variety of approaches to discussing literature. Literature enlarges one's horizons, introduces fresh points of view, and expands one's repertoire of potential responses to harmful, erroneous, unfair, or otherwise ludicrous cultural and societal systems. We've already touched on the complexity of Saussure's thought process. It was a portrait of an expert who was and is uniquely qualified. Of course, there's the issue that his book is written in a terse and dry tone since it was copied from his students' lecture notes. The work aims for precision; hence it relies heavily on the use of specialized vocabulary and advanced discourse structures to convey its ideas. Semantic aspects of Saussure's research continue to attract attention decades after his death. Saussure tries to explain the semantic process by which words acquire their meanings. *Le signe linguistique*, which Saussure defines as "an inseparable relationship of a sound picture and a notion," sheds light on how meaning develops. It is apparent, he adds, that "originally the idea is nothing, that it simply a value defined by its connection to other such values, and that without them the meaning would not exist" (Saussure 117). Saussure is arguing that a language's words have meaning independent of their relationship to real-world things. The French philosopher Roland Barthes made an effort to shed light on the matter by stating that "this'something' which is meant by the person who uses the sign... being neither an act of consciousness nor a real thing... can be defined only within the signifying process, in a quasi-tautological way" (Barthes. *Elements* 43)..

CONCLUSION

Rich, who has been publishing prose and poetry for over sixty years, has created a body of work that is both intricate and eclectic. It demonstrates, in a compelling manner, that the elderly activist also regularly evaluated poetry's character and function in public life. Her most recent poetry, written in the first decade of this century, is full of allusions to the past that serve to expose and accentuate the sleazy reality that the unwholesome present is a result of many illnesses from the past. We'll start with the most glaring points of contrast between Anglo-American and French feminist literary philosophy. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, feminists have shown that a pen is neither a symbolic penis, nor is writing a uniquely male activity. Feminists have always found support and acceptance in the realms of literature, criticism, and writing. Publishers, academic institutions, critical theory, instructional techniques, and literary criticism have all been impacted by the recent flood of books by and about women. Yet, this is not always a sign that patriarchy will fall. Yet it's a demonstration of feminism's ongoing influence.

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