

## Reshaping the Reality of Women: A Feminist Study of Selected Poems by Adrienne Rich (1929-2012)

Shaymaa Gamal Ahmed

### Abstract

This study focuses on Adrienne Rich's role in improving women's bad conditions in male-dominated societies. It examines Rich's contribution as a radical feminist poet considering three fields: social, literary, and political. Within the course of this study, some of Rich's poems are analyzed. Also, the poetic techniques that have been employed by the poet to clarify her themes are examined in order to demonstrate the progression of her work and views.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Adrienne Rich, reality, radical feminist poet, social justice, political awareness, literary liberation.

### Introduction

Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) is a radical feminist poet, critic and thinker who has distinguished herself as a poet of ideas among American women writers. The distinguishing quality of her poetry is that it depicts the image of woman in the American society as it evolves through varying phases. In addition, it traces her own growth as a person and poet.

The present study attempts to show the role of Adrienne Rich in improving women's bad conditions and transforming the miserable reality imposed on them. In order to achieve this, Rich focuses on women's social,

literary, and political consciousness. In her poetry, she thrives to achieve social justice of women and men. She tries to change the bad circumstances from which women suffered in patriarchal societies. At her time, women's

proper place was at home and they were not allowed to participate in social activities. Their skills and abilities were neglected and belittled. So, Rich urges women not to accept the traditional roles imposed on them and to try to assume other responsibilities that can be more useful for the society.

Also, Rich is an active advocate for women's literary liberation. For her, the literary world was dominated by men, and women had a secondary place in it. Women writers were forced to imitate male writers and adopt their ideas and views. So, Rich assumes the mission of liberating women writers who were obliged to suppress their talents and skills. In addition, Rich defends women's political rights through her poetry. She is convinced that women are powerful and skilled enough to achieve success in all fields and to participate in decision-making. Through examples of women who could challenge difficulties and achieve great accomplishments, Rich wants women to discover their real power and to use it for the good of the universe.

At its outset, this study sheds light on feminism, its characteristics, development, and leading figures. Also, it examines Adrienne Rich's life and literary career showing the major influences on her work and views. In addition, it sheds light on the role of Adrienne Rich in transforming the miserable reality imposed on women in patriarchal societies.

### **Feminism: An Overview**

In its simplest meaning, feminism refers to the advocacy of women's rights based on a belief in the equality of the sexes, whereas in its broadest use, it embodies everyone who is aware of and seeking to end women's subordination in all possible ways. Feminism "originates in the perception that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women" (qtd. in Beasley 27). Feminists devote themselves to defend women's social, literary, economic, and political rights. They believe that women have specific needs which remain neglected and unsatisfied, and that the

satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change in the social, economic, and political order (Delmar 8).

In the 1840s, the women's rights movement had started in the United States with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and the resulting Declaration of Sentiments, which claimed for women the principles of liberty and equality demonstrated in the American Declaration of Independence (Mc Millen 3). This was followed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's founding of the National Woman Suffrage Association. But even before the emergence of organized suffrage movements, women had been writing about the inequalities and injustices in women's social condition and campaigning to change it. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft had published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Freedman 3).

By 1912, feminists gained public attention as they attacked many Victorian concepts of femininity. They would simply reject the Victorian ideals of women being dependent, submissive, and repressed. Newspapers called feminists "Working Girls" and "The New Woman" (Evans, *Born for liberty* 164) as they behaved like men in their everyday lives. "New Women," for example, adopted new ways of life in which college education, professional careers, sexual freedom, and being single could be possible choices for women.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is considered one of the earliest expressions of liberal feminism in Europe. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) are central to the movement as well. Woolf introduced the notion of female bisexuality and a unique woman's voice and writing. Beauvoir introduced the notion of women's radical otherness; women as the second sex in patriarchal societies. At the same time liberal feminism appeared, a distinct socialist/Marxist feminism developed in workers' unions in the United States, in reformist social-democratic parties in Europe, and during the rise of

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communism in the Soviet Union. It was started by Rosa Luxemburg (1870–1919) in Germany, Alexandra Kollontai (1873–1952) in Russia, and Emma Goldman (1869–1940) in the United States (Krolokke and Sorensen 6).

Both liberal and social/Marxist feminists are similar in that they called for equality of women and men. They believed that men and women should be given equal opportunities. Women should be granted the right to participate in public activity as they have the same abilities like men. What distinguishes social/Marxist feminists from liberal feminists is that they focused on women's right to divorce and abortion. For them, women should have the right to choose what kind of life they want to live.

Also, feminists are divided according to moderate and radical political ideologies. Moderate feminists argued that all women are oppressed because of their reproductive role. They stated that women's liberation would be achieved by ending men's domination over women. On the other hand, radical feminists argued that women's liberation would be achieved by revising the "cultural definitions of womanhood and femininity" (Evans, *Tidal Wave* 231) and that these definitions should include women's different identities and experiences.

In the 1990s, a new type of feminism appeared among younger women who called themselves "new" feminists. Their purpose was to avoid misandry, racism and absence of female empowerment. These women "grew up with the idea that women and men, girls and boys, were equal" (Findlen xiv). To conclude, feminists have a common goal that is to support or advocate the rights of women and their equality with men, but each group has its own points of view. So, there are different types of feminism.

**Adrienne Rich: Life and Literary Career**

A highly noted feminist, Adrienne Rich was born in Maryland in 1929, the daughter of a Jewish father and a gentle mother, Rich describes herself in *Your Native Land, Your Life* as being "raised as

a son, taught to study but not to pray, taught to hold reading and writing sacred" (vii). Her father, a doctor, greatly influenced her intellectual development. Her poetry is characterized by her great intelligence and breadth of knowledge.

When she was a senior at Radcliffe in 1951, Rich was selected as the Yale Younger Poet. The judge, W. H. Auden, wrote the introduction to *A Change of World*, her first book of poems. Thus, Rich was encouraged by one of the most distinguished modern poets of the twentieth century, someone she herself admired and imitated. In addition, Rich's earliest mentors were men. From them, she learned how to write poems (Keyes 2).

After this early success and her graduation from Radcliffe, Rich was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, traveled in Europe and England, and married Alfred H. Conrad, an economist who taught at Harvard. She gave birth to their three sons during the years she was writing the poems for *The Diamond Cutters*, her second book. In the beginning stages of womanhood, she was overwhelmed with a feeling of resentment toward her children, who were depriving her from intellectual freedom. She often felt bored and depressed (Keyes 2).

In spite of the demands of her family, she produced several books of poetry and won many awards. In the mid-sixties, she lived and worked in New York City, where she became involved in anti-war protests. At the same time, Rich read widely in women's literature and history and played a leading role in the women's movement through her teaching, her poetry readings, and her lectures (Keyes 2). Thus, feminism occupied a central place in her life. She has collected the essays and reviews that she wrote during this period (1966-79) in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*.

Along with the political activism, teaching continued to be an important part of Rich's writing career. From 1972-73, she was the Fanny Hurst Visiting Professor of Creative Literature at Brandeis University. As she was moving up as a leader of the Woman's Movement, she felt she could no longer separate political from her

personal life (Sickels 58). Thus, the feminist movement enlightened her mind and allowed her to realize the reality of all oppressed people and fight to change their reality.

Undoubtedly, Rich is one of the leading American poets. Her long writing career that spans more than fifty years indicate that she has played the role of a revolutionist and a revisionist. She has gained a considerable praise because of this strange combination of aesthetics and activism. At the same time, she writes in "Sources" that she is a "woman with a mission, not to win prizes / but to change the laws of history" (*Your Native Land, Your Life* 23). She died on March, 2012 at her home in Santa Cruz, Calif. She was 82 years old.

#### **Adrienne Rich as a Social Justice Feminist**

Throughout her poetic career, Adrienne Rich has expressed her ideas and feelings about womanhood and female roles, about the use of the will and the power of creation to achieve change, and about the need for struggle to achieve social change at every level. These ideas make Rich one of the most important contributors to the modification of public awareness.

Rich's first two volumes, *A Change of World* and *The Diamond Cutters*, reflect her submission and helplessness in the male-dominated society. The opening poem in *A Change of World*, "Storm Warnings," sets the tone of both books:

What winds are walking overhead, what zone  
Of gray unrest is moving across the land,  
I leave the book upon a pillowed chair  
And walk from window to closed window, watching  
Bough strain against the sky. (17)

"The strict iambic rhythm, broken in the first, fourth, and sixth lines just like the wind press against the glass, indicates the threat of violent weather" (Cooper 4). Here, Rich expresses the fear of change through the metaphor of troubled weather. Not only does

the persona fear change, but she also tries to resist it. Her resistance of change can be felt through closing the windows to protect herself.

In most of her poems, Rich usually speaks of women who are oppressed and isolated at home. Her poem "Living in Sin" deals with the life of an unmarried couple who were living in America in 1950s. The man, who is a musician, convinced the woman that they would live an ideal life, but the reality is disappointing. When she thought of her life with him, she imagined only a comfortable and happy life, filled with love and romance. She never thought of the boring activities of the housework such as dusting and cleaning. She does all the housework and he doesn't help her. He cares only for himself. It seems that the woman lives a miserable life which is far from her expectations.

Throughout her poetry, Rich declares that she rejects women's subordination to men; whether the father or the husband. This subordination is also discussed in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." The title of the poem reflects a connection to another female figure, the mother-in law. This term is not only a successful means for comparing the status of women in their particular generations, but it also holds strong connections to a male figure. So, Rich, as a daughter, is not only fighting

for liberation from oppressive male figures and literary fathers, but also from those mothers who support patriarchy. These women defined themselves through their connections with men, and kept themselves under male control as Rich indicates in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in- Law," when she writes, "the beak that grips her, she becomes" (*Snapshots of a Daughter-in- Law* 22).

### **Adrienne Rich and Women's Literary Liberation**

Feminism acknowledges women as powerful, intelligent and responsible human beings who are able to make independent decisions and contribute to social progress. Its main purpose is to

achieve equality in society. Literature, like all other fields, was dominated by men. Women were considered incompetent as they lack wit, intelligence and creative talents. Under such conditions, many women writers chose to express themselves under a male penname. Also, many women seemed to be striving to write like men. Thus, feminist literature was severely criticized. Women writers faced many difficulties throughout their literary careers. They fought against all negative criticism and barriers and have emerged with a desire of change.

In *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, Rich, for the first time, asserts herself as a feminist writer. The title poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-in- Law" is Rich's first explicit feminist poem in which she begins to use non-traditional poetic forms and techniques. It reflects her attempts to liberate from the poetic rules of male writers and to have her own rules. Through this poem, Rich resists and rebels both as a woman and as a poet. She writes about women whose gifts and abilities have been buried.

"Diving into the Wreck," is another poem through which Rich wants to dive into history and revive the achievements of creative women who were neglected. Also, she wants to discover the damaged selves and the cause of this damage: "We are the half-destroyed instruments / that once

held to a course / the water eaten log / the fouled compass" (*Diving into the Wreck* 24). In addition to writing poetry in which she defends women and encourages them to show their talents, Rich examines children's literature and other books which were popular among girls. In the poem "The Novel," she writes that the female writer should be aware that beyond the ending of any text one reads lies one's unwritten life. So, she urges

woman to write in herself, and to write down her own opinions and findings.

Also, Many of Rich's early poems that discuss girlhood and children's texts are coincided with Rich's growth from the imitation of male writers toward writing as a woman writer, concentrating on

the suppression of the girl's imagination. The 1955 poem "Bears," for example, depicts a loss of creative power. Rich laments the disappearance of the "fairy" bears that had haunted her childhood imagination from her adult life: "Wonderful bears that walked my room all night, / Where are you gone, your sleek and fairy fur / Your eyes' veiled imperious light?" (*Collected Early Poems* 73).

In conclusion, Rich, through her literary works, has certainly proved that writing cannot be considered a mode of expression of only male attitudes, opinions and points of view. Instead, women must have the right to express their own feelings and opinions. So, Rich urges girls and women to read and write literature freely as she is convinced that female literary views and works will enrich literature in general.

#### **Adrienne Rich and the Awakening of Women's Political Awareness**

Like many other women activists who were fighting against war and for the rights of minorities, blacks and oppressed people, Rich became aware of the secondary roles that women were forced to play in patriarchal society. Thus, when the Feminist Movement appeared, Rich, with her great awareness and sensibility, was at the head of it. Since Rich professes to be a committed feminist, one finds that even her personal poems are political. She writes in "Blood, Bread and Poetry," "I was writing at the beginning of a decade of political revolt and hope and activism .... Even before I named myself a feminist, or a lesbian, I felt compelled to bring together, in my understanding and in my poems, the political world" (*Adrienne Rich's Poetry And Prose* 247-48).

During the stage in her poetry when she writes *Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968*, Rich's psychological and political break with patriarchy deepens further. She refuses the characterization of women as objects and explores the female body as a site of conflict, such as the battleground of the Vietnam War. In *Leaflets*, the war, particularly the Vietnam War, appears more as imagery than as direct subject. For Rich, the notion of "enemy" is

connected to the notion of "other": just as the Vietnamese are considered the enemy and the other, women also have suffered the same classifications. In this poetry book, she aims for people to feel the pain of war so that they can see the "other" not as an enemy but as another human being and to see women not as "others" but as equals.

For Rich, the "claim to personhood, the claim to share justly on the products of human labor, to participate fully in decision-making and to speak for ourselves in our own right" are very important (*Of Woman Born* xviii). Rich considers that "a complete emancipation / from all the crippling influences of fear" is possible only if opportunities are available for women "for the full / development of her forces of mind and body" ("Culture and Anarchy," *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* 10). Her focus turns from ...

her own experiences to women far back in history who struggled for a voice and for their basic rights. "*THE HISTORY OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE / of a movement / for many years unnoticed / or greatly misrepresented in the public press.*" The poet describes this difficult process in her essay, "When We Dead Awaken" as "*The awakening of consciousness*" (*Adrienne Rich's Poetry And Prose* 176).

Rich often expresses the end of male civilization in her poems. In "Waking in the Dark" she states: "A man's world. But finished/ They themselves have sold it to the machines" (*Diving into the Wreck* 8). She asserts that the world will be much better if it is controlled by the community of women. She is convinced of the power of the female energy, which, unlike masculine energy, is very productive. She predicts the amazing possibilities of the collective energy of women in "Hunger": to wield and guide its spray, destroying / poisons, parasites, rats, viruses (*The Dream of a Common Language* 12).

### Conclusion

As this study has shown, Adrienne Rich, like all feminists, refuses the concept that there is only one reality, that is the single male view of the world. For her, this is a strategy adopted in patriarchal societies in order to enforce the silence of women. She is convinced that there should be more than one reality. This can be achieved only through equality of men and women, a redistribution of power, and an end of women's silence.

Rich has been a creative writer whose personal experiences together with the social and political circumstances of her time influenced her perception of life, her literary works and the entire feminist movement. Her work has reflected the transformation in women's consciousness. Most women are not even aware of the fact that they are denied their rights. According to Rich, women should train themselves not to conform to conventions. She urges women community to realize that what may appear simply as the way things are could be a social system which offers privileges to some while denying them to others. She asserts that instead of accepting these social systems willingly, women should resort to criticizing and changing them.

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