



Tracing Patriarchy and Elements of Feminism in Adrienne Rich's Select Literary Works

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Introduction :

Adrienne Rich was a poet, essayist and an activist. She is known as a radical feminist whose transformation is reflected in her powerfully penned poems. Deeply ingrained in both the history of feminism and the realm of poetry, Rich's work remains some of the most esteemed and influential poetry of the 20th century.

Adrienne Rich was known for her tenacity of being at the forefront of all feminism issues. During her lifetime, feminism in America underwent a lot of growth from the realisation of patriarchal evil to standing up for the situation of women. The fight for feminism in America was boosted post the world war II economic boom, pushing college going ladies to start advocating for themselves.

In the 1960s, what would come to be known as the fight for women's rights was the second wave of feminism. The first wave of feminism that started in the 1920s amidst social reform, slowly died down with the victory of earning women the right to vote. But the fight was not yet over. Simone De Beauvoir then published her book "The Second Sex" in 1949 creating a storm of how women were always considered secondary to men. The book became extremely popular lending to us one of its famous quotes "one is not born but becomes a woman."

Building on the foundation that Beauvoir laid, Betty Frieden, another feminist erupted in America who wrote the famous book "The Feminine Mystique" in 1963 based on her unhappy and unfulfilling experience being a housewife. After the book's publication, it went viral in America, as many middle class women resonated with the message of stepping out of the 'female sphere', and fighting gender oppression, which she called "the problem that has no name."

From then onwards there was no turning back for the women of America. It was a fight against a deep rooted evil, the patriarchal system, and so it ought to not be an easy one.

Adrienne Cecile Rich was born in Baltimore to a father named Arnold Rich, a rising pathologist. He was very excited for his first newborn. Dr. Rich claimed his newborn would be a genius, and set out to do so himself. He took the responsibility of teaching his daughter stories with fanciful illustrations, while her mother Helen Rich taught her piano, from the time her little fingers could touch the piano. The making of a genius child was already in action, and Arnold Rich made sure he left no stone unturned.

Adrienne Rich lived a childhood, one that was privileged but also strict in her career choice. Her mother was an absent figure in her life, and only existed to tend to Dr. Arnold Rich's demands and choices. As a result Adrienne Rich grew up under her father's wings, constantly trying to impress him with her choices and decisions.

Her childhood was dictated by her father, but when Rich reached the age of college, she enrolled in Radcliffe, one that was away from her home. Although that did not change the dynamics in her family, she still found herself free from the prying eyes of her father.

As a young woman, she experienced a profound conflict between her aspiration for an artistic, intellectual life and the conventional life she was expected to lead. "From the age of 13 or 14, I had felt I was only acting the part of a feminine creature," she writes. "The lipstick and high heels of the era were difficult-to-manage disguises." She dreamt of writing poetry and exploring post-war Europe as a journalist. However, she found herself spending hours "trying to apply lipstick more adroitly, straightening the wandering seams of stockings, and talking about 'boys.'" (Stoner)

Despite her struggle, she was an excellent poet, and just at the age of 22, she published her first collection of poetry, "The Change of World". This collection went on to win the Yale Younger Poets Prize and also praise from W.H Auden.

Post her graduation at Radcliffe, she met Alfred Conrad, a Harvard professor in economics and later got married in 1953 in the US. She published her second poetry collection in 1995, titled "The Diamond Cutters", while a new addition to the family was made, a baby boy. She went on to win merit and

laud for her poetry including the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award. In 1963, Adrienne Rich published her third collection, “Snapshots of a daughter-in-law”, that changed the course of her life. This collection differed greatly from her previous two and dealt with themes of toxic masculinity and domestic life that were colliding with her artistic self.

It was only after marriage, that Adrienne Rich recognised and resonated with the harsh concept of patriarchy existing at that time. Despite growing up in a strict patriarchal household, it was later that Rich realised the poison she was around. She began with the imitation of men’s poetry style that focused on political affairs and limited the scope of writing. T.S Elliot and W.H Auden influenced the poetics of that time, and Rich did not shy away from following the man-made course. Rich in her early poetry, ‘spoke in a derivative voice, the language of the “universal.” Reluctant to speak as a woman, she echoed one of her male poetic ancestors. Because she hesitated to voice her own experience, her early poems are highly polished but avoid emotional depth.’ (Reisman, 2012, p. 200)

With the onset of the second wave of feminism and her marriage, it was then the turning point for Rich both as a woman and as a poet.

Rich published her first collection of poetry titled “A Change of World”, when she was in her college years at Radcliffe college in 1951. While this collection of poetry features some of the famous poems like ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’, ‘An Unsaid World’ and a few more, one can derive very less on her views of feminism from the following collection, except from the strongly opinionated poem ‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’.

“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.” (par. 2).

Here, Rich has portrayed Aunt Jennifer as being a victim of cultural restrictions and oppressive married life. She aspires to be like a tiger, wild and fearless, but the protagonist in the poem trembles and finds the easiest task difficult to do. Through this poem, Rich brings out the negative consequences of a patriarchal society through a third person narrative of Aunt Jennifer. She questions the relationship of a husband and wife, where clearly the husband has more power over his wife, enough to make her tremble in fear.

In the 1950s, the status of women in American society were strictly defined as housewives and homemakers. Their responsibility was to tend to their husbands, providing them freshly cooked meals after they returned back from their job that provided them their hard earned money and bread. A little or none freedom was provided to women, and their interests and wants were always considered secondary. It was the heavy weight of marriage upon women that confined them to their houses and their everyday household chores. Their idea of being as free as the wild tigers who were feared remained in their thoughts and dreams.

The year 1953 was a particularly good one for Adrienne Rich. She was marrying a man that she truly loved, Alfred.H.Conrad. Her second poetry collection in 1955 was named “‘The Diamond Cutter’s”. This collection that was published after her marriage contained in itself hints of an internal emotional turmoil that came from her marriage.

‘The Feminine Mystique’, written by Frieden in 1963 coined the term ‘feminine mystique’ which was the social presumption that true feminine women should be involved in their household duties and look down upon the ones that wanted to be presidents and scientists. The American women were expected to reject a possible cancer curing drug just because its effects could be unfeminine. They were favoured as blondes and thin, setting in the mindset that women should fit in the clothes instead of vice-versa. Advertisements of the 90s, featured thin beautiful women who were standing in kitchens and happy with their ‘perfect’ married life.

Women were compelled to feel ashamed if they weren’t happy and satisfied with a life of wiping kitchen floors, serving their husbands and feeding their children. It was considered a sin to talk of ‘careers’ and ‘politics’. And so if a woman felt dissatisfied with her life there was something wrong with her. It was a “problem that had no name” .

Adrienne Rich did not know too what went wrong in her married life. She no longer felt happy or fulfilled in taking care of her children and husband. She no longer wrote poems that won awards, poems that made her feel like she achieved something.

“Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before
an unlocked door, that cage of cages,
tell us, you bird, you tragical machine—
is this fertilisante douleur?”(par. 6)

Snapshots of a daughter-in-law that came out later was a much more personal work which examined her female identity and reflected the tensions she experienced as a mother as well as a wife. In the above lines, she expresses how a daughter-in-law feels caged and monotonous in the cycle of marriage, one where she feels unsatisfied romantically as well as unfulfilled. Here, ‘fertilisante douleur’ refers to ‘pain of fertility’ in French, which means that the pain of bearing children is an inescapable fate for women.

In the poem, Rich highlights a lot of instances of women being downplayed by men and even points to Mary Wolfstonecraft, who she refers to as a 'brave' who highlighted the importance of education for women but was heavily criticised by the male society,

In 1966, Adrienne Rich found herself moving from her Cambridge home along with Conrad and her three kids to New York. There, she began her teaching career and ended up publishing her fourth poetry collection titled, "Necessities of Life". This collection focused more on her troubled relationships like her fathers. It was a grim collection that had a common theme of death, with poems like "Mourning Picture" and "The Corpse Plant".

Arnold Rich, Adrienne's well reputed doctor father passed away in 1968 leaving his earthly presence from Adrienne's life. A lot of political changes were happening at that with the death of Martin King Luther as well. Rich was having her differences with her husband too, now that he was distracted enough to not have a conversation about his marriage that was faltering.

Soon after, the marriage started to break apart and both Conrad and Adrienne mutually decided on filing for a divorce. Adrienne loved her life after she moved out of her home where every new day was like a fresh breath of air for her. Conrad's reason for his frustration against his wife was that she was becoming too feminist. And this is what every man at that time thought of, as the women's rights movements started emerging in various cities.

Towards the end of the year 1970, Alfred Conrad, died by suicide leaving back his three kids. Adrienne Rich went through a rough patch coping with her past husband's death both negatively and positively. With both men gone from Rich's life she felt a sense of freedom like never before that was highlighted in a poem published much later in the 1990s, titled "The Days: Spring".

The world inferiorized women in every sphere of work. Women were deemed as the "Angel of the House", who were expected to perform all the household duties without any objections. Women writing at that time had to coincide with the patriarchal views and formats of male writing. They were considered inferior and secondary to men leaving them estranged in a world that demanded only household work. Thus, this thought process is highlighted in Adrienne Rich's poem "An Unsaid Word"

She who has power to call her man
From that estranged intensity
Where his mind forages alone (1.3)

The poem 'An unsaid word', shows the reality of the mindset of a woman who was compelled to feel lost and alone without her man. She was forced to be so dependent in her relation with man, deeming her insignificant as an individual. This role dedicated to women left her trapped in a cycle where all she could do was wait for her man, and then continue her life back as soon as the man in her life joined her back. The patriarchal structure was so deep-rooted that through this poem one can derive how the speaker has gone into self-denial, accepting her harsh fate.

Elaine Showalter, a renowned theorist, identified three stages of female writing: the feminine, feminist, and female stages. In the first stage, women imitated male writing styles. In the second stage, women advocated for their rights, often writing under pseudonyms. The third stage involved rejecting both imitation and protest to create a unique framework for women's writing. These phases are evident in Adrienne Rich's poetry. Her early work, such as the collection "A Change of World," mirrored the stylistic approaches of male writers.

Following the male writer's path, Rich's work lacked emotional depth and reality. Nevertheless, it was a new era for Adrienne Rich, one in which she emerged as a radical feminist.

Adrienne Rich loved reading feminist journals and newsletters. By then her another collection of poetry, "Diving into the Wreck: Poems" was to be released in 1973.

"the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters." (par.6)

This poem can be considered an extended metaphor showcasing the adventure of diving and exploring a wreck from the perspective of women's fight for equal rights. "The thing I came for", it is not something that has been written down or pre-decided by men before. The speaker is searching for something real and concrete, and not "the myth" that has been laid out by man.

“Diving into the wreck”, marks an important landmark in Adrienne Rich’s history of poetry as a feminist. It takes into account how women’s nature has always been defined by man and now the speaker is diving into this wreck, a damage that has already been done to the women. The wreck is broken, damaged yet beautiful, a resemblance of how there are yet real stories to be told.

Another poem in this collection is “Rape”. The theme depicts one of the key issues of the feminist movement in the 1970s, of violence against women. The poem indicates the case of a woman that has been subjugated to rape and is facing an officer. The officer is the part of a justice system that blames and criminalises the victim itself with words like “asking for it”. The society as well as the justice system is male-dominated and sexist towards women leaving them in fear and alone.

“There is a cop who is both prowler and father” highlights the paradox of someone who is simultaneously a guardian and a threat. For a woman, this irony means she must turn to a source of protection that also feels intimidating. The poem paints a disturbing picture of a system where instead of providing justice for women, could turn the tables making her a criminal.

“Diving into the Wreck: Poems” collection won the National Book Award for Poetry, which Adrienne Rich refused to accept. but along with two other feminists, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde.

“We, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker, together accept this award in the name of all the women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain....” (ch.16)

Adrienne Rich’s feminist poetry hits fueled the ongoing feminist movement, compelling famous female theorists such as Elaine Showalter to come up with theories such as Gynocriticism and Female Critique. Gynocriticism became an important theory that was put out in Showalter’s famous essay “Towards a Feminist Politics”. It encompasses the need to curate literature that is female written that consists of real female experiences, and not those that have been governed by men. It calls out for the creation of a female literary canon of reading and writing literature through the lens of females. Elaine Showalter states, “Adrienne’s books were the edge of where the women’s movement was going, where I saw my life going.”

In Adrienne Rich’s personal life, her personality was blossoming as she gradually embraced her identity as a feminist and lesbian. She began working on her book on motherhood and femininity, “Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution,” which she published in 1973. This book explores the significant concept of feeling trapped in the cycle of motherhood.

Adrienne Rich particularly did not experience a happy motherhood. She loved her children but sometimes it coincided with her love for poetry and art. She wanted to write poetry, but she could write nothing while staying and raising her children. She quotes “For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one’s mother, where I existed as myself”.

The book deals with the frustration, the obligation, the complexities as well as the joys of motherhood. The hold of patriarchy has compelled women to take the roles of mothers as champs because that is their duty. She emphasises the fact that motherhood is not just confined to houses, nurseries and schools but it also extends the alien realm of male world where they have the ability to think, write, and speak. She condemns the generational outlook towards motherhood, sharing her own experience. She claims that motherhood has been made into an institution, where women are seen as objects that need to reproduce and groom children. A shift of perspective needs to happen in this realm where women are always accepted to perform motherly sacrifice and such a change can not only make better powerful mothers but it can also serve as a source of inspiration in dismantling the deep rooted patriarchy.

Soon after, Adrienne Rich published another collection, “The Dream of a Common Language” in 1978, which features her famous poem “Power”.

In this poem, Adrienne Rich talks about the power of feminism in a different way. She takes the example of a famous female scientist Marie Curie, who received the nobel prize twice who risked her life to discover something better for humanity. It was due to overexposure of radiation during her research over the years that led to her ultimate death. This tragedy befalls the famous female scientist at a time when patriarchy was still heavy and her name was soiled in between the male society despite her useful contributions towards science.

The poem begins by criticising patriarchy because it overshadows many great female personalities and thus the speaker uses a pen instead of a shovel to dig up history remembering the great tragedy that befell Marie Curie who was never truly credited for her achievements.

“She died a famous woman denying
her wounds
denying
her wounds came from the same source as her power.” (14)

Towards the end, Rich notes that despite knowing that Marie’s radioactive experiments could cause her “radiation sickness,” Curie was determined to advance her research for the benefit of both men and women. This strong resolve led to physical harm from the elements she discovered. Nevertheless, she remained committed to her groundbreaking work on radioactivity, disregarding the severe health risks. Her efforts gradually caused her to lose her sight and suffer from damaged skin, making it difficult to write down her findings. Despite this, male thinkers often overlook Curie’s sacrifices and

achievements. Her wounds, rather than weakening her, strengthened her position as a woman overcoming patriarchy, as her challenges were the source of her power.

By the 1970s, feminism had started to seep into academics and Adrienne Rich started attending and speaking in various feminism panels while fully embracing her lesbian identity. Adrienne Rich's words were powerful and inspirational for the young public in universities and she was vocal for her stand on rights for women like never before.

Adrienne Rich went on to write essays on feminism like "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia" and attending various conferences. Professionally, Rich was thriving but physically, in her 50s, she was facing severe issues with her rheumatoid arthritis. But that did not stop her from actively participating in political movements, her growing career as well as her love life.

Over three decades, she transformed from a formalist poet viewing the world through a male perspective to a self-aware female poet with a woman's perspective, and then to a subversive figure exploring androgyny. She later identified as a lesbian and acknowledged her position as a privileged white lesbian, striving to understand women of different races, ethnicities, and social classes. By the early 1980s, she was deeply exploring her identity as a descendant of both Protestant and Jewish southerners.

Conclusion :

Succeeding second wave feminism, third wave feminism began from the 1990s. Feminist studies started seeping in academia, and women started emphasising the need for safe abortions. There was a rise of internet spread awareness on social media and other platforms. Voice was now raised on various matters of equal rights for women in both work spheres and entertainment spheres.

Feminism has since then come a long way with various feminist theories erupting and a lot of support for women who are willing to work. Many female poets and writers have significantly contributed in pushing feminism to the forefront and helping tackle patriarchy. Adrienne Rich's self discovery of feminism was perhaps the most dramatic. She was raised in a patriarchal household but stood up in her later life as a feminist. Not only did she make contributions to feminism but also firmly stood for lesbian rights as a lesbian herself.

She produced for the world an expansive treasury of poetry that revealed many truths of her life as well as the bitter reality of the world. More of these poems are "Planetarium" which recognises the woman astronomer Caroline Herschel whose achievements were overshadowed because of her brother. There is "The Burning of Paper instead of Children", which tackled the theme of patriarchy and much more.

At the age of 82, Adrienne Rich died suffering from long-term rheumatoid arthritis. She left behind a vast volume of poetry that the readers of today can still read and resonate with. Author Hillary Holladay, who wrote a biography on Adrienne Rich, titled "The Power of Adrienne Rich, quotes "One of the great paradoxes of her life was that so much that was steely and strong in her character came from her despotic father. In the words of Cynthia Rich, he "was the patriarch of the patriarchs who created a women confident enough to later rip away at patriarchy.""

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