

Challenging Patriarchy: Feminist Reading in Select Poems of Adrienne Rich

Wathiq Majid Jaber¹, Asaad Abderada Ali²

¹Assist.Lecturer, Ministry of Education, General Directorate of Education in Thiqr, Iraq

Corresponding Email: wathiqmajid@utq.edu.iq

²Lecturer, Ministry of Education, General Directorate of Education in Thiqr, Iraq

Received: August 5, 2023

Revised: September 6, 2023

Accepted: September 22, 2023

Abstract

This paper examines the feminism of Adrienne Rich, focusing on how she subverts patriarchal ideas and themes in a few of her poems. Rich's criticism of gender roles, power relationships, and the repressive aspects of patriarchy can be found by looking at her poetry through feminist lens. Rich effectively promotes gender equality by challenging patriarchal norms through the use of language, imagery, and poetic methods. Rich's poems under study are: "Tear Gas", "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff", "Snapshot of a Daughter in – Law", "Diving into the Wreck", "Power", and "Rape". The shape as well as themes of Rich's poetry prove a new style of American writing poetry. Rich refuses the rule that is put by male on female writing because she wants to express her voice and dream. Rich fights the patriarchy that is imposed on women and represses them for ages. Women are oppressed and their rights are violated by males society. Rich has used her poetry to defend women and has released them from the oppression of patriarchal society. She dares to write as a woman. Rich Introduces herself as a female who suffers in a patriarchal society. Rich is aware limited of language to transferring woman's voices, so she searched for an efficient device to transfer the experience and suffering of women.

Keywords: Adrienne Rich, Patriarchy, Simone De Beauvoir, Mary Daly, Feminist, Masculine Society

Introduction

A well-known feminist poet of the 20th century, Adrienne Rich, utilized poetry as a tool to question and undermines patriarchal standards. This paper explores a feminist reading of Rich's poetry, looking to how she challenges patriarchal power structures. She attempts to help women in American society to take their position in society and prove their existence. She tries to release the woman from the patriarchal society that is imposed on them. Rich is obliged to follow rules put by masculine poets. Rich is unable to express about her dreams as a female. Rich discovered that she has a duplicitous life because she should obey rules imposed on female writing. She protests against the dominating patriarchal authority which excluded women from all aspects of life and treated them as subordinate sex.

Despite the use of autobiography, women poets write about nature, repression, war, poverty, oppression, violence, and starvation in addition to other personal topics. The aesthetic of a woman poet is therefore linked to her political awareness. They primarily focus on the psychology of women and give voice to their sensibilities as well as their actual life experiences. Adrienne Rich, one of the most renowned poets in America, has emerged as a key figure in the feminist movement. She is a remarkable woman who has utilized her writings to address issues of women's oppression and the necessity for women's freedom from a world dominated by males.

Rich talks about feminist poets: The feminist poet finds "woman" and "poet" in political words, and through art that reflects, expresses, and creates her life, she both validates herself as she is and works towards the revolution, the transformation that she desires: breaking down the artificial barriers between private and public, between and the lover's bed (Shinde,2013,P. 24).

We see a conscience, an intense poetic imagination, and an engagement with political themes in Rich's poetry. Feminism has given Rich a new perspective on her power as a woman and a poet. She wishes to bring about a reconciliation between gender and power. Rich has inspired numerous writers and critics to emulate her literary brilliance over the years.

Rich depicts women in patriarchal society, their liberty and confinement, as well as their struggle for survival. Women confront difficulties as a result of the nature of the society in which they live. Because society is skewed toward men, women are rarely given opportunities to express their actual sentiments and wants. Language is one of the aspects of women's oppression that is strongly depicted in the poem Snapshots of Daughter-in-law. According to this poetry, the function of men to dominate language and the history of women's situation is only documented in the language used by subjugated men. In Aunt Jennifer's Tigers, a lady is shown to be imprisoned by the social norms and obligations of married life. The situation and personality of Aunt Jennifer are contrasted with the artwork she produced to show her goal. She has knitted tigers on a tapestry that serves as a powerful metaphor for who she aspires to be. Like a tiger, you are fearless, forceful, noble, and strong. The tigers are seen prancing across the screen, and the choice of color suggested that the tiger is self-assured, cheerful, and full of confidence.

Thus, Rich refuses the distinction between male and female or the control of man over woman. She discovered knowledge and language of poetry as a means to release women from the patriarchy of society in the future.

Critical View

Concept of Patriarchy

It is a social system that refers to the authority of the masculine on family who organized and control the family members "In the feminist contexts, patriarchy refers to a system of male power -- economic, social, political, material, ideological and psychological --that produces the oppression of women" (Gardener, 2006). Not all males are equally as oppressive against women as the patriarchy, but a lot of feminists contend that it is in all men's best interests to maintain the patriarchal system. The overall method and particular system of dominance in radical feminism affects women in all facets of existence. Thus, Rich refuses the distinction between male and female or the control of man on woman. Rich struggles to make an ample balance between females and males. She does her best to create a kind of equity and justice in society which means there is no difference in male and female society.

Rich and male Patriarchy

Rich grew up in an environment completely patriarchal according to Abrams (2009)

It is male –centered and controlled , and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains : familial ,religious ,political ,economic ,social ,legal, and artistic .From the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophic writings to present , the female tends to be defined by negative reference to the male as the human norm , hence as an Other , or kind of non-man, by her lack of the identifying male organ. (P.101)

Pioneers' poet control literary affairs. They established special rules for to what write. Rich found herself obliged to imitate conventions of written poetry. Rich's poetry style imitated male poets who put the rule of writing poetry. Rich was obliged to write about public affairs because women writers should follow the rules that are put by masculine. She shouldn't express her

voice and dream in her early poems because she discovered she lived duplicity. She should follow the rules and satisfy her desires as a female. According to Rich's essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision* "The charisma of Man seems to come purely from his power over her and his control of the world by force, not from anything fertile or life-giving in him" (Rich, 1972). She inferred these rules achieved male requirement and ignored women ones. Rich has described women's suffering to express their existence in a patriarchal society. This suffering is the result of the nature of society based on males. She altered from allegiance to the masculine world containing masculine aesthetics to womanly awareness. She changed assertion from female as seen by male, to the female repressed. Rich has the courage to write without using a mask. Introducing herself as a female poet tries to speak clearly about the potentialities of women's lives in the past, present, and future. She likes other feminists are aware of the limitations of language. Like other feminists Cixous and Irigaray, she looked for a useful tool to encode women's experience from the perspective of women :

I needed to touch you
 With a hand , a body
 But also with words
 I need a language to hear myself with
 To see myself in
 A language like pigment released on the board
 Blood-black. (Rich, 1995)

In the poem "Snapshots of Daughter-in-law " the main theme is autogenesis. She believes that women can be born again and recreated the female themselves. She claims that the most of the malicious legends spread by masculine society are around maternity. Rich argues presumption about motherhood and she demonstrates to be unjustified. She proves that in many situations, motherhood wasn't a choice for women but it was imposition on them by social rules. Women are enforced to obey. The following lines Rich indicates to motherhood without any magnification:

I didn't want this child
 You're the only one I 've told
 I want a child maybe , someday , but not now. (Rich, 2013)

3. Feminist literary Theorists

3.1. Simone de Beauvoir

She is a Philosopher, novelist, and feminist. Her book *The Second Sex* (2010) has the known sentence "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"(Beauvoir, 2010). According to her "There is a good principle that created order, light and man and a bad principle that created, chaos, darkness and woman "(Beauvoir, 2010) Beauvoir discovers the reasons why women are inferior to men because philosophers associate man with fairness and brightness while women are associated with injustice and darkness. Also, She discussed "feminine nature " (Waugh, 2012). There was no reason why women were treated inferior to men, across history and culture women were considered as second class. Biological differentiation doesn't give reason to the oppression of women by men. Substantially, she explains how to submit women to accept patriarchy on them; otherwise, women can't know who are they:

By the time humankind reaches the stage of writing its mythology and law , patriarchy is definitively established : it is males who write the codes. It is natural for them to give woman a

subordinate situation ; one might imagine , however , that they would consider her with the same benevolence as children and animals (Beauvoir).

So the idea of patriarchy builds on that woman is merely an evil, negative creature. They ought to accept subordinates without any objection. Patriarchy draws the relations among male who governs and female who governed without any rights so “man represents both the positive and the neutral aspects of humanity, woman represents only the negative” (Heinama, 2005). The repression on women encourages men for thinking of a woman as an inferior creature who can’t live independently from the authority of man as well as men enforce patriarchy on women because they have no identity and they can’t live outside of man's domination. Beauvoir argues:

Man thinks himself without woman .Woman does not think herself without man .And she is nothing essentially as sexed being ;for him she is sex , so she is it in the absolute .She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her ; she is the inessential in front of the essential .He is the subject ; he is the Absolute. She is the Other (2010)

Beauvoir believes that man consider woman as an inferior thing, her main role to saturate sex desire of man . Women reproductive function put them deficiency and link them to the household jobs as well as care of children . Man associates them with the feminine body, and hence with things and nature, because man regards himself as superior to nature and thus superior to women. Over time the concept of female passive and motherhood role has become a thing found In terms of culture and society, it was supposed to be a natural to women destiny. She kept informing the all-Western philosophical have different thoughts and views concerning the situation of the women. Patricia Waugh argues:

Sigmund Freud , who his theory of sexuality on the possession of the Phallus /penis . A man is a man because he possesses the phallus ; a woman is , simply , not a man .Therefore ;a woman is a lack , a negative –she lacks the phallus that confers subjectivity .This lack of the female self can also be detected in art and literature, where women frequently appear as objects of men’s desires or fears –metaphorical virgins or whores- but never complex autonomous individuals (Waugh, 2006).

This deficiency in females appears in art and literature because women always object to the desires of men. In literature, we find women play minor roles, but we never find them in complex roles. So women are related to body, passive and sin, and men are related to active, moral. “For de Beauvoir, marriage is an oppressive and exploitative economic arrangement which reinforces sexual inequality, and binds women to domesticity ”(Waugh, 2006). She created her picture of a “modern woman” (Waugh, 2006). She believes this woman would work and act equal to man in place of lamentation her subordinate to man.

Mary Daly

She is an American feminist theologian. She wrote in 1978 her book *Gyn/Ecology*. Her book considered the important extremist attributed description of male and female relationships. Daly discussed that faith and rules put by males are tools of domination and limit women. She started criticizing faith, she discussed a picture that introduce “God of father ”(Waugh, 2006) to support the law of males in a patriarchal society. Dominance patriarchy had killed the women who live outgoing patriarchal domination. They treated wise females as witches and they burnt them in church. This is indicative of the Christian understanding of women. She advised women to refuse the rules of patriarchy involving language and faith. According to Daly, the important device of patriarchy is language. She thought that females were speechless because males create patriarchal rules of language. Language like Christianity expanded outwardly female notions. Daly emphasized on a special language for women is the solution to obstruct the patriarchal discourse. So she wrote a feminist dictionary to assist this project.

Results and Discussion

Rich's feminist beliefs and her role as a feminist poet

The conflict of females is to conquer the unfairness of society. Rich argues this conflict in the poem "What is Possible ". This poem wants vigorous than faded attitude and confirms the confusion and demand radical shift. In the poem "Snapshot of a Daughter in –Law " she shows the conflict between female and patriarchal system. Rich requests women to fight:

Our blight has been our sinecure

Mere talent was enough for us (Rich ,1963).

In the poem "Necessities of Life" Rich uses the first personal pronoun "I" as a rejection of masculine dominance. The poem “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers ” examines the woman Aunt Jennifer submissive to cultural restrictions and the oppressive of married life. Rich describes Jennifer’s hands as trembling. She reflects on women suffering from oppressive men in society to get rid of male patriarchy through her imagination:

Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool

Find even the ivory needle hard to pull (Rich, 2002)

Rich chooses " Tiger " to represent what Aunt Jennifer aspires to be in life. Tiger-like in confidence, freedom, and power. Rich chooses of strong color to show the tiger’s happiness. Rich’s poem “Diving into the Wreck ” she writes for the first time as a female expressed oppression from males. She launches her journey to discover the truth. She uses the diver as a symbol to discover the identity of woman. Diver attempts to explore the harm that is happening to women along with the history of patriarchal society. The diver reaches a deeper point in the ocean to discover the shipwreck which refers for ignored life of women or probably the distorted urbanization desolate by fake thoughts about male and female roles. The explorer wants to erase the incorrect assumption made during the rewrite of history using language that sounds feminine. To enable women to express their opinions in the male language, which will eventually replace all other languages, assist women in regaining their individuality free from harassment by the male language. The diver refuses to travel through the figurative symbol"book of myths" on this journey because it is based on the exclusion of the female voice. She rejected the male story about females in history. She begins her journey to explore the “treasure”.

I came to explore the wreck

The words are purposes

The words are maps

I came to see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail

I stroke the beam of my lamp (Rich, 2002)

Females in the patriarchal discourse are related to nature while males are associated with culture, so we can say that male responsibility is rational but female responsibility is sentimental. This discrimination between males and females proves that male leaders while females are not, and males are rational, but females are not. Rich decides to start this journey because she suffers from patriarchal social institutions represented by marriage and motherhood. She tries to rewrite her's poem about women, not about public issue but about pain and oppression of women.

We are, I am, you are

By cowardice or courage

The one who find our way

A book of myths in which

Our names do not appear (Rich, 2002).

Rich uses specific word wreck to mean all patriarchal restrictions imposed on women. It may represent marriage or sexuality. Women's names have never been found in "The Book of Myth". Rich and women must search for the fact and accept them as survivors, not as victims. She emphasizes on the notion of sisterhood is more powerful than before. She realizes that her suffering is the suffering of all women. Rich's poem " Rape " represents a powerful poem that creates inside the reader a severe vision of pain and oppression of women:

There is a cop who is both prowle and father
he comes from your block, grew up with your brothers
had certain ideals
You hardly know him in his boots and sliver badge
On horseback, one hand touching his gun. (Rich, 2016)

The title of the poem has attracted our attention because it creates in our minds ruthless accidents that take place against women. The first line starts with a description of a police officer. Rich uses this image as a symbol of the dominance of a man holding his " gun " as a sign of power. The poet couldn't express her pain through language enforced by males. She depicts the suffering of women as a struggle between the investigator and the indicttee. This attitude creates notion how the investigator feels free , but the other has felt restricted :

And you see his blue eyes , the blue eyes of all the family whom you used to know , grow narrow and glisten , his hand types out the details and he wants them all. (Rich, 2016)

Depicting of investigator with "glistening" eyes from the feeling of fear and he feels "please "For the trembling voice of indicttee. Rich perfectly describes the conflict between a female who feels pain and patriarchy which represents a rapist. The poem "Rape" has complex ideas. The first depicts a woman feeling pain but she is still silent because the police officer has green eyes watching her and he has a weapon as a symbol of his authority. Others describe a woman's silence despite oppression from a patriarchal society. Rich's poem "The lioness " .She resembles a lioness in a cage with a woman under the authority of patriarchy. She opens the poem "Woman ":

The scent her beauty draws me to her place

The lioness pauses (Rich, 2016).

The woman corresponds with a lioness in a cage. Woman's life is restricted by wish for private space:

"in her back-and-forth pacing of three yards square " (Rich, 2016).

As the lioness is restricted to " lashed bars ". The idea of this poem "Cage" that represented Patriarchy in the case of females " three yards square ".

"a pen that measures three yards square

Lashed bars

The cage (Rich, 2016)

Rich in the poem "Diving into the Wreck " sees no difference between men and women. She demonstrates that all human beings come from androgynous. She said:

"We dive into the hold / I am she :

I am he ". (Rich , 2013)

Thus Rich shows there is no difference between the sexes. She rejects men trying to control women. They have knowledge and can create a new future. In the future, males' power to be obedient and control will clash with women's capacity to separate and free. Rich writes " The charisma of man seems to come purely from his power over her woman and his control over the world by force, not from anything fertile or life-giving " (Prace, 2009). Another poem is called "Power " is taken from the collection "The Dream of Common Language" contains a description of scientist . The main character in this poem scientist woman "Marie Curie" She represents women striving to knowledge to prove their existence in the patriarchal society. She dies because of her experiments. She is known as a famous scientist and academic and she is respected by doubtful males. The lines of the poem contain words like "her", "wounds " and " denying " These words represents predict of Rich for new scientist women :

"She died a famous woman denying her wounds

Denying

Her wounds came from the same source as her power "(Rich, 2016)

Themes and strategies contribute to challenging patriarchal norms

Mary Daly together with Beauvoir have the assumption that woman are treated as inferior and they are oppressed by man. Rich attempts to focus on the patriarchal relationship between woman and man in her poems. Rich elicits a new way to write as a woman express about women's experiences and suffered. Her poem " Aunt Jennifer's Tiger's " reflects the oppression of Aunt from society so she refuses this situation from man by weaving a tiger picture to fight male dominance. Rich used the tiger image to show women like tiger rejected male authority. There are several factors that led us to believe that Aunt was talking about her prior existence according to Raslan "The memory of her husband act as a symbol of patriarchal authority that negates women any prerogative even if it is an imaginary one like that of the tigers". (2019). Rich finishes her poem with the idea that the oppression of "Aunt Jennifer" by society is baneful. So there is no choice but to reject oppression. The poet presents an image of the tiger as a symbol of refusing patriarchy. In another poem titled "Rape " Rich writes about the pain that undergoes all women inside them. The title of poem creates severe images. The first about woman suffers from rapists as a symbol to man . The second image of a police officer who is armed with a gun. These images show the sorrow that patriarchy has instilled in women. Rich in the poem " The Lioness " confirms about bond between woman and nature. She compares the lioness in the cage with women who suffer from the patriarchal society. Women have power but they are bound to the hegemony of men like a cage limiting the lioness. It attempts to lift the boundaries on women to give them private space. In " Tear Gas " Rich shows another distress shortage of language to declare about their undergo so she breaks all the rules and writes as a woman who rejects patriarchal language. Accordingly " Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff " in this stanza from this poem :

I didn't want this child

You're they only one I've told

I want a child maybe , someday , but not now . (Rich, 2013)

Rich refers motherhood as patriarchal force in society in many cases. The poet talks about motherhood without exaltation. The poem " Diving into the Wreck" Represents the journey of

Rich to search for historical obstacles on women. Rich indicates to “Book of myths ” as a symbol of the historical struggle of women for their rights. Rich Wonders why the names of women don't appear in the history of humans. So she demands for justice between men and women :

We are , I am ,you are
a book of myths in which

Our names do not appear. (Rich, 2002)

Briefly, Rich circulates her view that patriarchal authority on women is put by men to confirm their power and convince women can't live without men. In the previous poem “ Snapshots of Daughter - in – Law” Rich expresses disappointed, angry, and repressed. She writes this poem when she was a young mother who had three children. She refuses to ignore her existence in a family without respect for herself. In short her identity as a daughter –in-law without a name. She invites a woman to reject this norm to explain how women suffer from patriarchy. The poet writes “ Power ”. She rewrites history in order to dispel the legend that women's positions are declining while men's are rising .She depends on her journey to travel in history in order to impugn the legend of man to humiliate woman .Rich’s poem “Power” is a lamentation for Marie Curie French scientist. She sacrifices herself to get knowledge as well as she performs well for all mankind .Curie is main persona in the poem .It describes the suffering of the scientist. It represents condemnation of patriarchy because it eliminates names of many women scientists from history .Rich documents Curie's oppressed by patriarchy. Firstly, she dies from unclear experiments, secondly, her name was eliminated from history .Rich refers to Curie as “ bottle amber ” hidden in the past. Rich uses “backhoe ” rather than a pen to dig through the history so Rich explores the name of Curie and many scientists forget patriarchy:

Living in the earth –deposits of our history

Today a backhoe divulged out of crumbling flank of earth one bottle amber perfect a hundred-year-old (Rich, 2002)

Rich uses special technique in writing this poem:

The first line of “ power ”with the last , one can easily find out that while the poem starts with words “ living ” it ends with the noun “ Power ” .This indicates that any woman should possess a space of power so that she will not merely endure and survive , but also prevail over the male programming .(Raslan, 2019)

As a result, Rich warns women. They must end man's dominance over them; else, women would be oppressed by males who utilize patriarchy to subjugate subservient women.

Conclusion

Rich opposes the patriarchal system in all parts of life that males impose on women. She rejects masculine repression of females and dares to write as a female poet in order to speak about women's life in the future. Rich is conscious of the limitations of language in patriarchal society, so she seeks out a means to demonstrate experience from the perspective of women. She demonstrates that the concept of motherhood was incorrect. She shows motherhood without any exaggeration because it is forced by patriarchal culture and in many circumstances is not the option of women. Because any female who can bear children is considered a woman. In a patriarchal society, women are discriminated against based on their ability to bear children, thus Rich rejects patriarchal society standards. She underlines that there is no difference between the sexes and condemns those who try to dominate women. Women have been liberated from oppression and their rights have been returned. Women may forge a new world free of male constraints through the power of knowledge.

References

- Abrama M. H. & Geoffery G. Harpham. (2009). *A handbook of Literary Terms*. India: Cengage.
- Beauvoir, S. D. (2010). *The Second Sex* (Constance Borde & Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). New York: Vintage.
- Cooper, Jane Roberta, ed. (2002). *Reading Adrienne Rich Reviews and Re-Visions, 1951-1981*. United States. University of Michigan Press.
- Gardner, Catherine Villanueva. (2006). *Historical Dictionary of Feminist Philosophy*. United States: Scarecrow Press.
- Hassan, M., Talif, R., & Kaur, H. (2015). *Resurfacing Female Identity via Language in Adrienne Rich's Diving into the Wreck*. Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 6, 245-253.
- Heinama, S. (2005). *Simone de Beauvoir's Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*. Hypatia, 14(4), 114-132.
- Jayasudha, P. (2016). *A Feministic Perspective of the Selected Poems of Adrienne Rich*. International Journal of English Research, 2(6), 49-50.
- Kumar, Jeevan. (2013). *Adrienne Rich's Snapshots of a daughter-in-Law*. International Journal of English and Literature, 4(6), 254-258.
- Muthukumaran, K., and D. Sudhakar. "Female Awareness in the Select Poems of Adrienne Rich." <http://www.rjelal.com/6.4.18/333-337%20K.Muthukumaran>. (accessed July 1, 2022).
- Prace, B. (2009) *poetry of Adrienne Rich: The Sources of Female Power* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) “. <https://www.academia.edu/37781443/>. [accessed September 15, 2022]
- Raslan, U. (2019). Patriarchy Rejected: A Feminist Reading in Some Selected Poems by Adrienne Rich and Fatima Naoot. English language and Literature Studies 9, no.1 [January 2019], under “Setting,” <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/29ff/05c85d9e53f4ca5138bf75dd0b4d23b52881.pdf> [accessed November 15, 2022].
- Rich A. (1995). *Collects Early Poems, 1950-1970*. New York: Norton.
- Rich A. (2002). *The Fact of a Doorframe: From Diving into the Wreck, 1950 - 2001*. New York: Norton.
- Rich A. (2013). *Later Poems: Selected and New, 1971-2012*. New York: Norton.
- Rich A. (2016). *Collected Poems, 1920-2012: The Phenomenology of Anger*. New York: Norton.
- Rich A. (2016). *Collected Poems, 1920-2012: The Dream of a Common Language*. New York: Norton.
- Rich A. (2016). *The Fact of a Doorframe: The Dream of Common Language, 1950- 2001*. New York: Norton.
- Rich, A. (1972). *When We Dead A waken: Writing as Re-Vision*. College English: Women, Writing, and Teaching, 18-30.
- Rich. A. (1963). *Snapshots of a daughter- in – Law: 1954- 1962*. New York: Norton.
- Rich. A. (2013). *Later Poems: Selected and New: 1971 -2012*. New York: Norton.

- Shined, S.P. (2002). *Gender Articulations study of Poetry of Adrienne rich and Margaret Atwood*.
- Waugh, Patricia. (2006). *Literary Theory and Criticism*. India: Oxford University Press.