

## ***Voice of Dissent: Negation of Heterosexuality in Adrienne Rich's Poetry***

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### ***Abstract***

*This article explores the opposition of heterosexuality in Adrienne Rich's poems. Rich has questioned the heterosexual institutions in her poetry and has consciously worked to re-create women's identity taking an oppositional stance towards heterosexuality and trying to establish women's positional stance. Heterosexuality as a political institution is so pervasive that it has not only controlled women's bodies by various means but also has controlled their consciousness. It proved that women should seek their primary emotional and erotic ties in themselves to have women-identified experiences and freedom. Rich's poems; "Rape", "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", "Twenty-one Love Poems I" and "Diving into the Wreck" are examined through radical feminism and lesbian perspectives.*

**Key Words:** consciousness, dissent, heterosexuality, identity, negation, opposition, voice, etc.

### **Introduction**

Adrienne Rich's poems reflect the subordination and victimization of women's world. While reading her famous poems using the eagle eye view, she depicts the inhumanity and evil practices imposing not only on American women but also the women around the globe. We easily undertake the common flavor and experiences of motherhood, lesbianism, gender, and ethnicity which turn to the fact for the victimization of most women. In her poems, the issue of Sexuality behind the well-accepted paragon of women's stories encourages modern women to revise the old literature from the female perspective.

Rich has expressed her worry about the restrictions that traditional society places on women in many of her poems. According to her, the fundamental reason why women are oppressed in society is due to the heterosexual system. Within such a society, for a few years, many women spent their intellect, time, energy, and lives in search of their

identities but they could not pay attention to dismantle the existing views, values, traditions, and limitations given to women. But Rich argues that within the heterosexual world, women cannot achieve their identities and liberation. In *Arts of the Possible* Rich says, “Every group that lives under the naming and image-making power of a dominant culture is at risk from the mental fragmentation, and needs an art that can resist it” (49). Living in heterosexuality, it is impossible to have a female identity. Because of this, the idea of sexual identity needs to adapt.

Rich has questioned the heterosexual institution in her poetry and has consciously worked to re-create women's identity taking an oppositional stance towards heterosexuality and trying to establish women's positional stance. Heterosexuality as a political institution is so pervasive that it has not only controlled women's bodies by various means but also has controlled their consciousness. That is why; women should seek their primary emotional and erotic ties in themselves to have women-identified experience and towards freedom.

Rich, in her poetry, has played a significant role in social and political change. She has largely influenced women's lives. Her poems reflect challenges to heterosexuality and a chronicle of the evolving consciousness of modern women. By distancing herself from the political and social reality that trivializes and devalues women, Rich raises the voice of opposition against adopting patriarchal conceptions of femininity. In a patriarchal society, male dominance, both implicitly and explicitly, determines the roles that women will and will not play. Moreover, women's abilities are typically restricted to the mystic and artistic, with no place in the practical or political spheres. In this regard, her foreword to “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1983) delineates:

I want to say a little about the way “Compulsory Heterosexuality” was originally conceived and the context in which we are now living. It was written in part to challenge the erasure of lesbian existence from so much of scholarly feminist literature, an erasure which I felt (and feel) to be not just anti-lesbian, but anti-feminist in its consequences, and to distort the experience of heterosexual women as well. (23)

Thus, Rich challenges “compulsory heterosexuality” for its impact on women, which has affected women's lives and has a role in the erasure of lesbian existence by distorting their experience. Hence, Rich refuses heterosexuality in the following poems.

“Rape” dissents the association with heterosexual institutions for forcing women to choose the terms in which their stories are told. Helen Vendler discusses 'Rape' as an 'incrimination' of all men in the encapsulation of brothers and fathers in the portrait of this rapist super cop (Gelpi 243). Likewise, Carry centers his discussion on the policeman who “instinctively identifies with the victimizer” and the “fascist bureaucracy” in which women are “having been forced”, a crime (Gelpi 151). 'Rape' as a poem is concerned primarily with the policeman, as a self-righteous political attack on the brutality that is essentially on powerless women. The voice in the poem is a woman who is abused by 'compulsory heterosexuality'.

In "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" She reveals women being overburdened by heterosexuality as an institution. The poem, which is written in three meticulously rhymed stanzas, initially reads as a tribute to the speaker's aunt's talent for embroidering a panel with a tiger. But, a close examination finds pictures and symbols that allude to Aunt Jennifer's and her husband's relationship as the oppressor. Rich portrays feminists as conforming to society's expectations. "The heavy weight of Uncle's wedding band/ sits firmly onto Aunt Jennifer's hand, (7)" denotes the power of a male, which is the source of Jennifer's unhappiness. The massive weight silences the real gleam of the tiger, the ferocity of women's energy by the domination of which heterosexuality can subdue or cripple women's power to self-identification. The tiger in a way is a self-autonomy, a break away from traditional imposition.

Being the poem's primary symbol, the "tiger" denotes power. Her embroidery reflects her desire for independence, bravery, strength, and freedom. Yet it's important to keep in mind that this concept is ironically woven into the usage of a regular meter and a style that adheres to conventional poetic forms. Such a legal arrangement can be interpreted as a parallel to Aunt Jennifer's captivity within the family.

The tigers in the poem are gendered as men, which is a problem. Her tigers are alluring, but eventually, they are tempting her into submitting to the guy. Because of this, the argument against heterosexuality is envisioned in terms dictated by the patriarchy, somewhat like how Aunt Jennifer could frame her needlepoint. Therefore Rich's sense of being lesbian is still constrained by the formal requirement of Aunt Jennifer's verse, just as the figures depicting Aunt Jennifer's wants are still constrained by the wedding ring. She expresses, "When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie/ Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by"(7).

The poem sequence "Twenty-one Love Poems I" opens with opposition to heterosexuality percolated with a late capitalist industrial society where advertisement nudes women for commercial gains. Women are made to sell in the display what Rich says is 'tabloid cruelty' and such women's lives she compares walking in the 'rain-soaked garbage' (5). And, Rich presents her idea concerning the double-edged sword of romantic connection as the present romantic relationship of two lesbians in a series of interconnected free verse poems. While doing so, Rich explores the complexities of same-sex pairing. In this regard, Ernest J. Smith identifies, "central theme [...] Is the struggle toward emergence and ascertain of self amidst forces that would impede poetic and personal freedom" (3). This self-assertion is a process of identification. If women try to identify with each other and if they try to be creative they face disgrace and they fade away. The speaker prefers the days when "the long-legged young girls playing ball/in the junior high school playground" (11-12) to that of women under heterosexuality. That is why, the first sequence end with the following assertion, "No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees/Sycamore blazing through the sulfuric air dappled with scars still/exuberantly budding/our animal passion rooted in the city" (14-17). Rich feels that lesbian feminism has provided a sense of community since she is adamant that the central

structure's requirement for heterosexuality upholds male dominance. Her own decision, however, is not motivated by any desire to force it on others. Instead, it encourages a stronger emphasis on each person's right to freedom of choice when seeking out their sense of fulfillment. Regarding selfhood, Jennifer Ann Smith writes:

The speaker of "Twenty-one Love Poems" in addition to looking inward for the source of her relationship's difficulties, must look outward to the political and social pressures exerted on her emotional and physical bond with another woman in order to complete her self-development. While engaging with the conventions of the traditional love sequence, Rich critique [3] conventional gender roles, sexual identities, and their destructive influence on a woman's search for self...to achieve selfhood through their romantic relationship. (3)

The attempt at self-definition by the lesbian speaker is creative, contextual and performative, in that she must fashion not only a space for herself and her lover in a heterosexist culture but also an identity for them.

In "Diving into the Wreck", Rich vents her anger over how women are treated in the heterosexual culture that has been created. Old myths that depict women as dualistic beings and the "other" are a representation of this cultural construct. Throughout the beginning of time, men have treated women in ways that dominate, depersonalize, and dehumanize their sexuality. Rich seeks to reconstruct the damaged culture that has muted women's identity by adopting a humane viewpoint. She is delving into an old mythological wreck that has been battering the majority of sexual definitions for a very long time and is a byproduct of heterosexuality as an institution.

The speaker is a woman, a protagonist who is generally called a hero; a quest and a buried treasure. The quest is a critique of heterosexist myths, and the treasure is knowledge: the whole buried knowledge of the personal and cultural relationship between the speaker is in her expedition of recovering the hitherto erased history of women. She carries ". . . the book of myths and the loaded the camera" (1-2) so that she can explore the wreck made to women by the heterosexual institution with their wrong constructs. The book she is carrying is the book of myth; an obsolete myth therefore women's names do not appear. This shows that men-made history doesn't include women, they are erased; the erasure of lesbian existence. For such erasure, the speaker carefully manages the journey: While she put on her body armor and mask and loaded the camera, she examined the knife's edge. Following such preparation, She plunges into a sea of symbols that leads to the last one at the bottom—the wreck. I move like an insect down the ladder, the speaker says, feeling small inside the vastness of the liquid surrounding environment (30). The ocean can be compared to maternal nutrition because it is a huge body of water that connects continents and gives food and minerals to billions of creatures. As a result, the water that makes up it can be recognized as coming from the domain of women.

Language is one interpretation that could be made of this fluid medium. The ocean darkens as the speaker sinks, and the goal of the expedition is made clear:

I came to explore the wreck  
The words are purposes.  
The words are maps.  
The came to see the damage that was done  
and the treasures that prevail  
[... ]  
the thing I came for:  
the wreck and not the story of the wreck.  
the thing itself and not the myth. (52-63)

The speaker's goal is to examine the "damage done." "The thing itself," or "the wreck," focuses on what is drowning rather than on the mythologies or histories associated with the ruin. When "the item itself" is destroyed, it is likely that before the disaster, before some historical or idealized time, people knew how to change or live on earth. In this perfect world, people would be free to express who they are without regard to social conventions or gender norms. On the other hand, the wreck and its stories represent the ways that our civilization forced men and women to diverge, causing women to be wrecked. In this meaning, the speaker makes an unexpected finding towards the end of their search: And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair/stream's black, the merman in his armored body/I am she: I am he (72-77). The speaker identifies herself as a mermaid, no less powerful than a man. The gender distinction blurs and the lesbian possibility resonates. The figure exudes emotion that is visible to the world—the world of lesbian existence.

In the eighteenth section, Rich herself reveals as the speaker of the poem. She tells of female experience. People tell her, "you are telling the story of your life" (5) and she responds, "The story of our lives becomes our lives" (7). She refers to the possibility of one woman loving another based on a shared commonality between and among women's experiences. But the separation between two intimate women is inevitable because heterosexual society does not allow this to happen. And Rich expresses her despair as she could not do like the Victorian poet Mathew Arnold, at the end and expresses her difficulty:

I feel estrangement, yes. As I've felt dawn  
pushing toward daybreak. Something a cleft of light-?  
close between grief and anger, a space opens  
where I am Adrienne alone. And growing colder. (11-14)

The 'self' dissolves here, for the persona and the poet become one-like lovers. But this detachment between the two women lovers makes the poet cold against the reality they are controlled.

The speaker questions the causes of their separation in the nineteenth part. Then she finds herself in "the eye of winter, city, anger, poverty, and death" (5) where "... there are no miracles" (8). She states the difficulty in a woman loving another:

Two women together is a work

nothing in civilization has made simple  
 two people together is a work  
 heroic in its ordinariness  
 the slow-picked, halting traverse of a pitch  
 where the fiercest attention becomes routine  
 look at the faces of those who have chosen it. (12-18)

In a heterosexual society, a woman's love for another is not simple, a woman's ordinary work is stigmatized and their creativity turns ineffective. Finally, she asks what could have happened to the real lesbian like the speaker.

In the twentieth section, the speaker mourns for her lost love. She is having runs on in her head and she couldn't communicate with her lover because she is "drowning in secrets, fear wound round her throat" (7). Communication problems are evident between the two lovers. What she discovers is she is talking to herself. Thus, Rich presents self-identification through an intense monologue, ". . . I was talking to my own soul" (12).

The speaker's fragmented soul, now, quests for wholeness and emphasizes a woman's love for another in the final section of the poem sequence. Despite the end of the relationship, the lesbian speaker maintains her connection to her lover through their shared choice of solitude: ". . . the mind/casting back to where her solitude/shared could be chosen without loneliness" (6-8). Both she and her lover choose to exist in solitude without the stigma of loneliness because they knew fulfillment with one another and recognize that such fulfillment is possible in the future and their solitude is shared. The last line affirms women's choice and ability to create their own place to speak and to live as they see appropriate: "a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle" (15) in this regard Jennifer Ann Smith States: "The choice made by Rich's speaker is active, creative and optimistic- walk [5] . . . [and] draw [5]" (Smith 10).

She further says that Rich concludes her love sequences by depicting a female speaker consciously making some kind of choice emphasizing her conception of woman as active, questioning and determined to make love not an escape but a way of being in the world—an exploration of unique perspectives. Smith again adds: "Rich depicts female selfhood in her "Twenty-one Love Poems" as primarily achieved concerning political and social responsibilities and through the continuous act of female-centered creation . . ." (10).

Rich's female-centered creation indicates any woman who identifies herself with the woman-centered perspective with another woman based on female-centered consciousness; it is not much with genital contact. Her common theme throughout much of her work is the "primary presence of women to ourselves and each other" (qtd. in Smith 10).

Rich has deconstructed the hetero/homo dichotomy since all such distinctions are constructed on male agreed upon perception or the alike. So, to challenge this one is to challenge all the others too. Hence, lesbianism is a force against 'rigid definition' and polar

apositions expressed in terms of gaps, spaces, disruption, the experimental, radical disruption, interrogation, and so on.

Heterosexuality distorts women's experience. It is so powerful that it has made women believe that heterosexuality is a compulsory union among the sexes. Rich says that women who believe that women's primary emotional and erotic energy is towards men are their 'false consciousness'. It is the propaganda of heterosexual politics that percolates false convictions regarding sexuality to cramp women's creative potential and strip women of their autonomy by implicating them in more than profit motives. So, a male genital fetishist perspective like pornography has an influence on consciousness and the like forces have convinced women that marriage and a preference for men's company are inescapable. But it is an implied tactic of heterosexual politics to wrench women's intellect and energy regarding their self-identification.

Women should free up their thinking regarding sexual preference and choice from heterosexual 'double bias'- racism and sexism if they are to explore new paths and shatter the great silence to establish their identity. Women's history is a history of erasure, disruption, and silence. Being a mother in this situation, the lesbian experience has distinct oppressions, meanings, and potentialities that cannot be fully understood until sexually stigmatized existence is undone. Unbracketing is a crucial value for the freedom of women and the celebration of their 'self', and reviving of their silenced voices.

Rich is, basically, concerned with the exploration of 'female spaces'. She, in both her prose and poetry, starts with the observation of the oppressed female in isolation, and later, radically decides to break away from the existing age-long order imposed by heterosexuality as an institution, by taking a lesbian stance in creating a lesbian community.

### **Conclusion**

Rich's poetry identifies her body's pain with the pain of the socio-political and economic body of the women's position in the world, and she is dedicated to using poetry as a weapon of resistance. Her struggle is, therefore finds a safe place not only for her but for all women. Rich has refashioned female identity from her oppositional stance towards heterosexuality and has finally placed the female self towards a more autonomous lesbian stance in her poetry.

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