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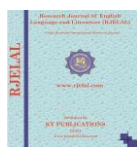
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## FEMALE AWARENESS IN THE SELECT POEMS OF ADRIENNE RICH

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### ABSTRACT

This paper entitled "Female Awareness In The Select Poems Of Adrienne Rich is a modest attempt in bringing out Adrienne Rice's struggle for identifying herself which takes her to female awareness. Many of her poems convey the message of the quest for identity of American woman.

### INTRODUCTION

Born May 16, 1929 in Baltimore, Maryland, Rich was home schooled until fourth grade, but showed an early interest in writing and availed herself father's extensive Victorian literature collection. Rice graduated from Rodcliffe College in 1951, and in the same year she published her first poetry collection "A change of world" which garnered the Yale series of younger poets' award.

### FEMALE AWARENESS

Rich's change over from loyalty to the male world including male aesthetics to the female consciousness. Her shift of emphasis from the women as seen by man, to the woman repressed, can be properly apprehended in this volume. She had time enough to find out what did not know she knew, when she first started to write. If Snapshots of a Daughter-in Law is considered a great step in the growth of Rich's feminist awareness, it is because it testifies to her recognition of gender.

In this volume, one experiences a new concern entering her work-her place in American history's quietly strong perfumes" can shape out desires like reduction fantasies of the public mind" (38). This observation does not create any difficulty and it does not challenge the poem's form. That stanza is beautifully concluded with a rather secure

couplet. "prisoners of what we think occurred/or dreamers dreaming toward a final word." (39)

Rich's image of historically determined allusion is little more than an exclusively elegant conceit. The struggle a feminist undergoes to overcome oppressive- between mind and body, ideal and real, the struggle with the traditional oppositions between objectivity and subjectivity, intellect and emotion is shown in the poem "what is possible". A simple subjectivity or emotionality is extolled and it introduces series of new contrasts through which subjectivity and emotionality is extolled and it introduces series of new contrasts through which subjectivity and emotionality might be refashioned and reappropriated. It also recalls the theme-the need for envisioning possibilities that are not now actualities. Possible relationships, possible 'places', possible states of mind. What is possible is not merely imaginable; it is, more importantly, what may move us to action in and on the world. The poem demands an active rather than an escapist stance and emphasize the disruption required for revolutionary change.

In contrast with the intellectual climate for women in the early fifties which prohibited young girls to write poems because they are poems, the late fifties made it possible for women to write directly about women. In Snapshots of a Daughter-in - Law, Rich is able to come out in the open and

show the conflict between the women in the traditional role and the newly awakened women, In the ten sections of the poem, a women as daughter – in –law”. Is seen in different feminine role which men have defined. But Rich blasts for having acquiesced and now wants them to resist. “Out blight has been our sincere / mere talent was enough for us.”(38)

Rich also makes an attempt to reach the personal and connect it with the public. In “Prospective Immigrants” (59), she hints at it as possible future development. “If you go through there is always the risk of/remembering your name”. (15) This indicates the crucial role self has to play as the source and subject of her poetry. Emotional experiences resulting from interaction with people provide the subject for a large number of poems of Rice. In Rich, they are beings of flesh and blood. Rich’s marriage was her second encounter with the masculine. Her marriage was failing and meant for her the collapse of the very structure of live. In “A marriage in the 60s”, she says that “pieces of the universe are missing”(45).

The poems of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law* (1963) From a kind of transition between her earlier and later styles. The more formal stanzas are there, recalling the rhyme schemes of poems like “At a Bach Concert” the blank verse of “Living in Sin”. But several sections, are written in the carefully controlled “Free” verse that increasingly dominates her work. Another important point in this poem is the photographic method so characteristic of her verse, a method which should from the start be distinguished from most varieties of imagism.

“Snapshots” is also a radical critique of woman’s place as a beautiful object in man’s world. The critic Helen Vendler says, a quote from Horace praising a

Sweetly laughing, sweetly speaking” girl is ironically juxtaposed with the image of a woman showing her legs.....

She is haunted by voices telling her to resist and repel, voices which she can hear but not obey ... the thinking woman who has absorbed great literature and philosophy

there by becomes her own worst intellectual enemy. (57).

It is for the first time in *Necessities of Life* that Rich employs the 1 person pronoun, emblematic of her change to formalist aesthetic and the corresponding rejection of the objectivity in the masculine manifested on the social plane. Rich redefines poetry on the basis of her changed attitude toward the role of the self in tackling social and aesthetic problems. She makes a scathing criticism of the separation of the self from the object, which characterizes traditional poetry. Feminist criticism sees the imbalance in the ethical relationship between the male and the female principles in the patriarchal society. According to Rich, it is the separation of these principles in the Western society that has caused what she calls a “terrifying dissociation of sensibility”. (10)

The field of personal involvement is extended in *Leaflets* and *The Will to Change*. Ins head of trying to analyses the ways in which woman’s experience has been conditioned by patriarchy, she confronts experience directly, leaving behind the indirect strategies adopted generally by women writers. “The Demon Lover” indicates the need for immersion in experience.

Take hold, sweet hands, come on....  
Broken!  
When you Falter, all eludes,  
This is a seasick way,  
This almost/never touching, this  
Drawing-off; this to-and-fro  
Subtlety talks in your eyes,  
Your tongue knows what it knows.  
I want your secrets-I will have them out.  
Seasick, I drop into the sea . (21-22).

Many of the themes of *Necessities of Life* are picked up in *Leaflets*, often with significant differences. The fire that pervaded the earlier volume are still present, but they seem to have gone cold. In “Orion” Rich speculates:” ... and the stars in it are dim/ and may be have stopped burning”. (79) In “picnic” she asks: “What kind of sunlight is it/that leaves the rocks so cold?”(92).

Rich, in her handling of the marital difficulties which was having immediate and terrible

consequences for his personal life is only slightly less remote, indirect, and fragmented in "Photograph of the Unmade Bed" in contrast with the extreme attitude assumed in "Images of Godard" The image to line photograph to help give substances to what is otherwise presented as totally private and internal moment of failure between herself and her husband is used in this poem. Though Rich mentions the violence and harm they have done each other, these events seem more mental than real. They are part of the poet's ulterior world of thought as she contemplates the uses of language, and the nature of cruelty that has occurred between them.

The poet explores the wreckage of personal and public realities in her next volume, *Diving into the Wreck*. In an essay that appeared in a 1973 issue of the critical journal *Parnassus*, the noted critic Helen Vendler observed that "the forcefulness of *Diving in the Wreck* comes from the wish not to huddle wounded, but to explore these caverns, the scar, the depths of wreckage". (2)

The immersion in experience both present and past is best expressed in this volume. The wreck is here a multivalent metaphor for the story of western culture, the poet's own past and her subconscious. The dive symbolizes the change in perspective from that of the unaffected objective observer to the actor forcefully arriving at the center of action. This is a far cry from the state of mind of the first two volumes. Experience which has been denied to her by isolation from the society now becomes the source of her strength. *Diving into the Wreck* is also the starting place for the realist.

I came to see the damage that was done  
and the treasures that prevail.  
I stole the beam of my lamp  
Slowly along the flank  
Of something more permanent  
Than fish or weed. (163)

And it is a place so timeless. So basic to human existence, that both prehistory and the present are rejoined.

When the man refuses to join the woman in breaking down a destructive system he comes to be in complicity with that system. He becomes one with the forces of unfeeling, violence, and

exploitation. It is a step forward in Rich's search, enabling her to define the oppressed self in relation to the concrete image of the oppressor, she has arrived at. It is the culmination of this new understanding and the resultant shift of the world that one witnesses in *Diving into the Wreck*. The volume makes the final rejection of the father in favour of the woman's self as the sustaining force.

Rich now uses her power in new ways: to write the words that women do not hear in other places—the topics, like motherhood and lesbianism—and to write about herself openly and directly as a woman for the first time. The taking of these freedoms has radically changed her art, just as it has in many respects ended her prolonged isolation as an artist. Yet she takes the risk of extending her hand of asking to be touched, even the touch never satisfies:

Over and over, starting to wake  
I dive back to discover you  
still whispering. TOUCH ME, We, go on  
streaming through the slow  
city light forest ocean  
stirring our body hair (155).

Rich's disparate themes of Sexuality, Time, History, Death, Isolation and Pain are combined into a certified vision in *Diving into the Wreck*. Violence still exists and is burgeoning:

Madness.Suicide.Murder.  
Is there no way out but these?  
The enemy, always just out of sight  
snowshoeing the next forest, shrouded  
in a snowy blur, abominable snow man...  
gunning down the babies at My Lai ... (166)

In "The Ninth Symphony of Beethoven Understood at Last as a Sexual Message", Rich hints at how she has come to see not only people, but art, object, even single fleeting thoughts as histories. The more she exposes the consequences of one's outer experiences have merged. Sexual themes gain the forefront, though her poems are not nearly sexual: "The tragedy of sex/lies around us, a woodlot/the axes are sharpened for". (153) Her concept of sisterhood is strong than ever before as

she recognizes that her pain is the pain of the women:

Why are you crying dry up your tears  
we are sisters  
words fail you in the stare of her hunger  
you hand her another book  
scored by your pencil  
you hand her a record  
of two flutes in India reciting. (160)

Her anger is out in the open now, but she does not choose castration or capital punishment for the objects of her hatred. Instead as a poet, she chooses transformations. When he dreams of meeting the enemy she sees herself:

raking his body down to the thread  
of existence  
burning away his lie  
leaving him in a new  
world: a changed  
man. (167)

This rage, the dominant emotion in the volumes for the *Snapshots of Daughter-in-Law* to *Diving into the Wreck* is what helps the poets finally to make a clean break with the past. It is the emotion which provides the energy for social change.

Rich has been a Radcliffe under-graduate, a wife and the mother of three sons, a widely read poet with a large audience, who has received numerous awards, the latest are the Lenore-Marshall-Nation Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Award for poetry for her *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, a university Professor, a social activist and war resister, a feminist, and a lesbian. Each of these dimensions of her experience has contributed to her vision.

The modern formalism, she inherited from them is distinctly articulated in "At Bach Concert" from *A Change of World*, where she declares "A too compassionate art is half an art" (71). This capitulation to patriarchal values was rewarded by her acceptance into the field of male poets.

*A Change of World* (1951) was followed by *The Diamond Cutters* (1955) four years later. The

young poet created within these poems a dream world of flawless perfection, in which women took pleasure in giving and men in demanding in the kind of meters, rhymes and stanzas, which stayed within the male tradition. She was rewarded by what she was looking for, male heads' nooding approval. Randall Jarrell described her as "an enchanting poet", "a sort princes in a fairly tale"(1).

According to Helen Vendler, one cannot help nothing how free from compulsion Rich's images have become.

The early poems were so neat in their useful skins of imagery. If a color appeared in the upper left of the tapestry, it was sure to reappear, economically but predictably in the lower right. Now precision of feeling and exactness of recollection govern the correlative and it is allowed considerable freedom. (47)

Many of the themes of *Necessities of Life* are picked up and treated with significant differences in *Leaflets*. The fire that pervade the earlier volumes are still present, but they seem to have gone cold. The poems of this volume are filled with images of blood and skin. The book becomes an attempt to understand the sources and limits of human energy, an exploration that can reach no clear conclusions. Her attitude toward male also undergoes considerable change. In the poem "Orion" (*Leaflets*) the superior male is viewed as a multiple of herself, "my fiercehalf brother", a powerful element she can personally claim: As I throw back my head to take you in/an old transfusion happens again;/divine astronomy is nothing to it. (81)

After the publication of *Diving into the Wreck*, Rich has increasingly devoted her energy to recording women's history and to understanding the ancient and contemporary forms of female relationship and there by embark upon the final phase of her poetic development. Rich searches the past for historical clues that can help women envisage a viable feature. She also includes observations form her personal experience and achieves an unusual blend of subjective and objective analysis. "This combination of private and

public discourse in order to eliminate arbitrary stylistic categories parables her refusal to accept the traditional distinction between politics and poetry. (202)

In all these poems Rich seems to be writing in the interrogatory mode, questioning over again what happened in the past and her relation to it. It is the pieces of herself, not just the just of other women, that she is now attempting to bring together. In the final poem in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Par*, "Turning the Wheel", Rich includes two portraits of a desert witch. Though these poems are unusually powerful in their own right, the fact that they are also self portraits of the artist gives them special value. They appear to contain clear warnings on how Rich now wishes to be understood by the community for whom she largely writes. Rich's openness to change, and her capacity to question images that are complicit with natural, romantic, or domestic sexism have placed her in the vanguard or writers emerging from the women's movement.

The women's movement and the presence of an articulate lesbian feminist community within it, stood by Rich and she has been able to put aside her early devotion to male literary traditions and to patriarchal values, and has emerged as the spokeswoman for an entire new generation of female poets.

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