

Feminist Elements in the selected poems of Adrienne Rich

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Abstract: Feminism is the radical movement that there is no difference and discrimination between man and woman on the ground of their creativity and potential power and both are human beings in equal proportion. It asserts a firm belief in sexual equality and strives to eradicate sexist domination in the society. But it is patriarchy that denies the potentials and rights of women and compels women remain obedient to her household work and whims of husband. Rich is an American feminist who staunchly believed in the power of woman as much as she believed in the power of man. She demands liberation of woman from the shackles of male domination and advocates emancipation. Through the medium of poetry she expresses covertly as well as overtly the female issues and concerns in order to counter patriarchal violence and to make women aware of their true identity.

Keywords; Feminism, patriarchy, liberation, Identity, Emancipation.

Present article analyses critically the poems such as *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*, *Power and Planetarium* by Rich from feminist perspective. Women are presented down ages negatively. Beauvoir pointed out that Aristotle argued, women are female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities while Thomas Aquinas referred to women as 'imperfect man and the incidental being'. Pythagoras wrote, 'there is good principle that created order, light and man and bad principle that created chaos, darkness and woman'. In almost every professional field, women are still treated as second class citizen. These images and stereotypes of women have been vehemently countered and challenged By Rich in her literary works and critiques which showed the high ambition and creative power of women.

Adrienne Rich was born in 1929 in Baltimore, Maryland. She was the elder of two sisters. She went to Roland Park Country School which she described as a good old fashioned Girls School. Completing the school education she acquired her college diploma at Radcliffe college where she focused primarily on poetry and writing. Her first collection of poetry *A Change of World* was selected by Auden for the Yale series of Younger Poets Award. Rich received a Guggenheim Fellowship to study at Oxford for a year. 1960s began a period of change in Rich's life; she received the National Institute of Arts and Letter Award. In 1961 she got second Guggenheim Fellowship to work at the Netherlands Economic Institute. Moving

her family to New York in 1966 Rich became involved in antiwar ,civil rights and feminist activism. In 1968 she signed `the Writers and Editors War Tax Protest, vowing to refuse tax payments in protest against Vietnam war .*The Will to Change* (1971) reflects increasingly radical political content and interest in poetic form. In *Snapshots of a Daughter-in Law* she offers a critical analysis of the life of being both a mother and daughter-in-law and the impact of gender in their lives. *Diving into the Wreck* she writes about feminism and other social issues. In particular she writes openly about her outrage with the patriarchal nature of the society and becomes a voice for other. Rich also wrote and published a number of nonfiction books that tackle feminist issues. Some of these books are: *Of Woman Born, Motherhood as Experience and Institution, Blood, Bread and Poetry, etc.* Especially the *Bread and Poetry* contains the famous feminist essay entitled "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", and *Feminism and Community*. Her literary works , interviews and documentaries demonstrate that Rich has profound perspective on feminism and woman empowerment. She also prefers to use the term "women's liberation" rather than feminism. She uses the term women's liberation to mean that women can finally be liberated from the chains that can be seen as barriers to their rights. She says in *Of Woman Born* that "we need to understand the power and powerlessness embodied in motherhood in patriarchal culture." She also speaks regarding the need for women to unite in her book *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. In this book, she wrote:

"Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience. Our future depends on the sanity of each of us, and we have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other."

In *Toward a Politics of Location*, Rich speaks on the politics of location and the birth of the concept of locatedness. She here attempts to reconnect the female thought and speech with the female body. Focusing on location she expresses her concerns for all the women of the world, not limited to just women in her own country. Here Rich invites all women of the world to think of their identity and existence. Of *Woman Born*, she writes of lesbian desire and sexuality. She said that lesbianism for her a political as well as personal issue.

The poem *Aunt Jennifer `s Tigers* describes the oppressed condition of women in the male dominated society. It expresses the inner feelings and passion of a woman for creativity. The line `Aunt Jennifer `s fingers fluttering through her wool` symbolizes her passion for creativity and protest. Her embroidery is a motif comprising of fearless tigers moving freely in the forest. The line` They do not fear men beneath the tree` indicates that the tigers are fearless creatures while Jennifer dominated by her husband with patriarchal notion is constantly afraid of her husband. Betty Friedan said,` when one begins to think about it ,America depends heavily on women`s passive dependence, their femininity. Femininity if one still wants to call it ,makes American women a target and a victim of the sexual sell`. This pattern of free and fearless tigers indicates her inner desire to live a free and brave life in

the society. The line `Find even the ivory needle hard pull` implies that she is scared of doing embroidery and fears her husband wrath .Since the day she got married she has been fulfilling her husband demands and whims. Rich juxtaposes very meticulously two opposite things the freedom of the tigers and the slavery of the aunt and shows how aunt is hungry for freedom that the tigers enjoyed. The wedding ring on her hand is a constant reminder that she belongs to her husband. The poet draws a comparison between fearful aunt and the brave tigers drawn on her panel. She is envious of the tigers that continue to move freely and proudly. Aunt longs to reach the glory and pride of the tigers but her desire will remain ineffective forever. Rich very sagaciously criticizes the male chauvinism and shows creative power of woman and argues for a liberal society. Poem also reminds us the quote `the only way for a woman ,as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own.`(Feminine Mystique).

Power is such a poem by Adrienne Rich which disturbs patriarchy ,demonstrating the power of women and functions as an inspiration for future generation of women. The poem shows the hardwork of Marie Curie and her wounds that she underwent during her research and thus she became a name. The great success that Marie achieved in the radioactivity expresses that the inequality of the sexes is neither biological ,nor divine mandate ,but a cultural construct. Beauviour writes that women like Rosa Luxemburg and Marie Curie, ``brilliantly demonstrate that it is not women`s inferiority that has determined their historical insignificance. Rather it is their historical insignificance that has doomed them to inferiority.`` The lines `one bottle amber perfect a hundred year old /Cure for fever or melancholy a tonic` imply that male sexist oppression and domination of women is perhaps the oldest and the most universal form of human domination known to history and the life and achievement of Marie Curie can function as a cure to this oldest fever of domination. The lines

`Her body bombarded for years by the element.

She purified.

It seems she denied to the end.

the source of the cataracts on her eyes.

demonstrate that success is neither easy nor patriarchy can easily be countered rather it needs life-annihilating labour and invincible courage. The line `She died a famous woman denying her wounds` shows that a woman can get a respectable position in the society when she does hardwork and overcomes her wounds.

Planetarium is a poem that deals with the activity of the eminent astronomer Caroline Herschel who lived a hardworking and pathbreaking life. She had the tenacity of spirit and the passion for work. She is the very paragon of female identity and creative artist. The poem explores the activism of Herschel which unlocks a universe of possibility for woman. However, the poem's observations are not limited to Caroline Herschel. The lines

A woman in the shape of a monster

A monster in the shape of a woman.

indicate "others" too have been forced to experience society in a way that makes them feel like "a monster." The main theme of the poem is the mistreatment of women and the denial of their achievement by the so-called society. Rich alludes to the female astronomer, presenting her as an exemplar for all the great women whose achievements have gone unmarked or have been overshadowed by the achievements of men around them. The phrase "among the clocks and instruments" and "in her 98 years to discover 8 comets" demonstrate that success in science or in other domains of human activity or the ideals of liberty and equality cannot be obtained through passivity rather it needs punctuality and perseverance. The poem is that of the dawning awareness or the recognition of the world around us. The speaker now imagines herself not as a monster in the shape of a woman but as an instrument, herself a useful tool in her own defense. Rich discloses how galaxies of women like Herschel have been viewed as monsters because they subvert social expectations which are confusing. In her attempt to turn this confusion into images, she is no longer seeking the recognition of the society that rejects her but instead is privileging her own wellbeing; she is an instrument in search of her own relief and on a quest for the reconstruction of the mind. The success of Herschel supports the quote "who know what woman can be when they are finally free to become themselves? Who knows what women's intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love?" (Feminine Mystique)

It can be said that Rich's literary corpus and critiques belong to the second-wave feminism. Her views on equality and liberty for women are revolutionary. She came to know that women have the creative power and potentials to challenge the mindset of the patriarchal society regarding women and to reestablish true identity. Her views strongly coincide with the feminist way of thinking during that time period. According to Rich, society as a whole is founded on patriarchy and curtails the rights of women. For equality to be achieved between the sexes, the prevailing notions will have to be readjusted to fit the female perspective. She very discreetly presents the examples of Herschel, Marie Curie et al and breaks down the images and stereotypes of women that phallogocentric writers (mis)represented. Adrienne Rich observed that women have their strong creative force and productivity in them but they liked to remain subordinate and dependent to men. This is how, according to Rich "women are not born but they become." The life and activity of the real characters like Marie Curie and Herschel or the imaginary character like Aunt Jennifer will function as inspiration and motivation for future generation of women and will move toward women empowerment.

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