

## “Double-Voiced Discourse” in Adrienne Rich’s *A Change of World*

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### Abstract

The feminist movement, which has been credited with bringing about significant social and political change in modern civilization, owes a great deal to Adrienne Rich, whose writings played an important role in it. Rich’s early education at the hands of her father solidified her commitment to a literary legacy dominated by the great male poets of the past who stressed craftsmanship, elegance, and perfection. Her first volume of poetry, *A Change of World*, was also praised for its formalistic techniques and traditional representation of women, which seems to be the dominant tone of the poems. However, a discerning reader can find a subdued tone underneath the conventional style and theme of the poems. This subdued tone depicts women’s desires and aspirations as well as their latent strength to resist the limiting constraints of heteropatriarchal society. Her early poems thus represent a ‘double-voiced discourse’, with a continuous interplay between the dominant tone of the poem and the muted voice underneath.

**Keywords:** Feminist, patriarchal, formalism, voice, women.

Adrienne Rich’s poetry, prose, and personality have all played a crucial part in the feminism movement, which has been credited with bringing about immense social and political transformation in contemporary civilization. Rich, in her literary career that spanned over seven decades, has addressed the majority of the pressing issues such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and imperialism, which have been at the forefront of public discussion and debate throughout the latter half of the twentieth century as well as the beginning of the twenty-first century. By delving deeply into the lives and experiences of women, she has become a pioneer, witness, and prophet for the feminist cause. She was described by Cary Nelson as ‘one of the most widely read and influential poets of the second half of the 20th century’ (145). She was also acknowledged for bringing the oppression of women in general and lesbians in particular to the forefront of artistic as well as cultural debate. Throughout her career, starting in 1951, she has consistently broken new ground with the feminist perspective that shapes the content of her poetry, the issues she addresses, and the feminine aesthetic she has produced.

Adrienne Rich's early poetry was heavily influenced by her father, who not only encouraged her to read but also motivated her to write poetry. Her love of literature began in her father's library, where she studied the works of Ibsen, Arnold, Blake, Keats, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Tennyson. The early instruction that Rich received at the hands of her father strengthened her loyalty to a literary tradition dominated by the great male poets of the past. This poetic tradition prioritises meticulous craftsmanship, as well as grace and perfection. As a consequence, her early poems are objective, meticulously crafted, and brilliant in their use of rhyme and metre. They also include echoes of W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost. Before receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree from Radcliffe College, Rich published *A Change of World* (1951), her first collection of poems that demonstrated her command of the formal components of poetry. W. H. Auden, a literary legend, chose her debut volume as the winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. After that, Auden went on to write the preface to the book. W. H. Auden lauded her debut book for its exemplary mastery of style as well as its deft handling of conventional subject matter:

Miss Rich, who is, I understand, twenty-one years old, displays a modesty not so common at that age, which disclaims any extraordinary vision, and a love for her medium, a determination to ensure that whatever she writes shall, at least, not be shoddily made. In a young poet, as T. S. Eliot has observed, the most promising sign is craftsmanship... Miss Rich's poems rarely fail on any of these counts... the poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs: that, for a first volume, is a good deal. (Rich, 278)

Despite the fact that the volume is titled *A Change of World*, the poems included therein have nothing to do with the change of women's lives or the position of women in our society and culture. There are a total of forty poems in the book, although only three of them include women as the main character or speaker. There is a reoccurring motif illustrating how women may find refuge at home from the dangers of the outside world, whether those dangers come in the form of social upheaval, as in the poem "The Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room", or natural disasters, as in the poem "Storm Warnings". The female protagonists of the poems also do not leave their homes as they are preoccupied with traditionally prescribed feminine activities such as weaving or embroidery and taking care of their children or husbands. Moreover, the poems demonstrate the poet's skill in using a variety of poetic forms and rhetorical techniques. In contrast to Rich's later poems, which have been revolutionary in their reimagining or redefining of women's lives and experiences from a feminine viewpoint, the poems collected here are traditional in both thematic and stylistic matters. Therefore, reading the early poems of Adrienne Rich and expecting to find the feminist visionary in her later poetry may be a major disappointment.

The poems in her first collection may seem preoccupied with the traditional themes and formalistic techniques that male poets of the past have been writing about and doing, but a discerning reader will notice that the poems convey much more. Adalaide

Morris also points out that the poem's technical brilliance and craftsmanship contribute to 'an act of covering' (137), implying that they hide as much as they reveal. These early works show signs of her eventual artistic development and her commitment to fighting against sexism and women's oppression, as well as her allegiance to women's rights and woman-identified experiences. In her article "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", Elaine Showalter argues that contemporary women authors exhibit a 'double-voiced discourse' (201), which contains a muted story underneath the dominant one. The story's dominant tone reflects long-held patriarchal ideals in which women play subordinate roles. The story's muted tone is symbolic of women's longing for independence from restrictive patriarchal norms and gender roles, as well as their latent strength and ability to achieve that goal. Despite the fact that Showalter examines the fictions written by women's writers, the concept is equally applicable to poetry. The reader is confronted with a challenge when they come across this 'double-voiced discourse' in literary works written by women. In this challenging situation, alternative interpretations of the text are possible depending on whether the reader focuses on the dominant story or the muted story.

The narratives of Rich's early poems may leave readers with the same difficult predicament. Although the prevailing or dominant tone of the poems seems to reinforce patriarchal norms, the poems' muted or subdued tone contains the seeds of Rich's mature feminist viewpoint. Despite the fact that the predominant tone of the poems in her first collection appears to demonstrate women's powerlessness and restraint of desires, the poems' muted tone conveys women's desire and latent potential to deconstruct the constraining laws of heteropatriarchal society. Her early poems are, thus, characterised by a conflict between energy and restraint. The female protagonists of several significant poems, including "An Unsaid Word", "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", and "Mathilde in Normandy", seem to accept that women's energies should be checked while also yearning for more active expression -- the power to alter gender norms and social structures that restrict women's autonomous agency.

The poem "An Unsaid Word" is a great place to begin analysing Rich's early utilization of 'double-voiced discourse'. This seven-line poem illustrates a woman's powerlessness and willful submission to gender stereotypes. The patriarchal society-sanctioned stereotypes enable males to wander anywhere they like, but women are required to stay permanently inside certain boundaries and constraints. Aware of her inferior position in the relationship, the protagonist of the poem waits patiently for her partner to restore his attention to her:

She who has power to call her man  
From that estranged intensity  
Where his mind forages alone,  
Yet keeps her peace and leaves him free,  
And when his thoughts to her return  
Stands where he left her, still his own,  
Knows this the hardest thing to learn. (1-7)

Though her power derives from her grasp of language, namely her ability to summon her man and articulate her desires, she restrains this power by remaining silent. She keeps her quiet, and her lack of interference allows him to follow his ambitions and engage in intellectual pursuits. The woman becomes a willing helpmate and devoted companion to the man because she keeps her desires and complaints to herself. Her meekness and humility satisfy the masculine ideal of a woman. The dominant voice is also reflected in the style's elegance, which is formal in scansion, rhyme scheme, syntax, and diction. She is aware of how difficult it is to maintain the self-control required to have a solid relationship with a man. Realizing her place in the relationship is a difficult lesson for the waiting woman. In order to exist as a woman and companion to a man in this male-dominated culture, Rich's heroine works to preserve the difficult lessons of passivity, silence, restraint, evasion, and subjection.

Although the dominant tone, which illustrates the powerlessness of women, prevails throughout the seven-line poem, the muted voice manages to break through the formal perfection of the poem in a very subtle way. Examining the relationship that exists between the poem's title and the first line of the poem -- 'She who has power to call her man' (1) -- enables one to pick up on her hushed voice throughout the poem. The words that are not said are the source of a woman's strength, and learning how to rein in that power is the most difficult thing to do. Rich also emphasises in her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* that women must 'begin to grasp [language as] a material resource that women have never before collectively attempted to repossess' (247). The actual power of a woman rests in her ability to use words to give an outlet to the things she wants and the aspirations she possesses. Entering the woman's mind, the speaker is aware of what she could do but does not, and what she craves but refuses. In spite of the fact that she refrains from making use of this power, she is acutely aware of the potential power that may be harnessed via her articulation. The poem contains a burgeoning but uncertain kind of feminism, which becomes clear in the poem's equivocal last line, which gives way to an implicit irony. The hardest thing for women to learn is how to limit their ability to act and express themselves freely. The full exercise of man's authority is contingent on women's denial and constraining of their needs and desires. These constraints strangle her since they oblige her to repress her most fundamental emotions. Rich also uses the poem to criticise society's stringent gender norms, which he believes are to blame for relegating women to lifestyles of passivity, denial, and repression.

Although Adrienne Rich's earlier poems were unable to portray the female foraging alone in her own estranged intensity, they did present veiled pictures of that activity, which may lead to an assertion of a woman's power as well as authority. Poems like "Mathilde in Normandy" and "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", which feature women engaged in needlework, are 'double-voiced' poems in which women may not own their power directly but try to communicate their power and desires through their art. These poems revolve around the complex interaction between the traditional female role and the artist's role for women. Rich's "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" gives us a female artist who struggles with the pressures and expectations that come with traditional gender norms for women in our patriarchal society. The poem portrays a lady whose marital life is more harmful than the wild independence symbolised by the tigers in her

imaginative representation. She sits in front of her screen, weighed down by the responsibilities of her marriage, while she embroiders the vibrant tigers.

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,  
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.  
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;  
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's fingers 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.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie  
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.  
The tigers in the panel that she made  
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid. (1-12)

The tigers, which represent the creative force and the power of art in Aunt Jennifer's tapestry, are the subject of the first verse. The second stanza depicts the painful experiences of Aunt Jennifer's married life as well as the limitations of domestic life. The last stanza implies that the tigers in her tapestry will endure even after Aunt Jennifer passes away, serving as a symbol of her unfulfilled desires. Her professional accomplishments have not given her any sense of independence in her personal life. She's portrayed as the meek victim of male-dominated norms. The woman-artist feels weighed down by 'Uncle's wedding band' or the obligations of marriage. She is a helpless victim whose husband is cruel and indifferent to her. Even after her death, 'her terrified hands will lie/ Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by' (9-10). The poem as a whole represents the lack of freedom in Aunt Jennifer's life as well as the troubles that she had faced and endured as a woman.

The poem has a very clean, formal tone, yet Rich's desire to overthrow the patriarchal society is abundantly clear. These tigers stand in for the idealised qualities of power, energy, and lack of fear that women attribute to their works of art but fail to internalise in their own lives. The tigers she weaves by hand on the screen represent the freedom and spontaneity she is denied by her marriage and the domestic life she leads, which proves to be her demise. A manifestation of the aunt's deepest desires, the tigers roam freely, are unafraid of men, and are confident in their own beauty. They become a metaphor for the repressed female energy and strength that women want to exhibit in their daily lives but are unable to do so due to societal constraints. By presenting such an image, Adrienne Rich is making a more overt statement about her feminist visions.

"Mathilde in Normandy" also portrays a creative woman. The character in the poem, like in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", casts what she cannot have onto the artefacts she creates. Moreover, by comparing the home-bound woman with the wandering man, the poem returns to the main theme of "An Unsaid Word". In actuality, "Mathilde in

Normandy” is a synthesis of the two poems previously discussed, and as a consequence, the poem’s ‘double-voiced discourse’ becomes more ambitious. The poem is based on the well-known story that Queen Mathilde, who was married to William the Conqueror, created the Bayeux Tapestry. The Norman Invasion of England is portrayed in this tapestry. The women in “Mathilde in Normandy” wait at home for the return of their seafaring warrior husbands, William the Conqueror and his troops, in the same manner that the woman in “An Unsaid Word” waits for her husband. While their husbands are at war, the ladies entertain themselves in their pastime by weaving tapestries depicting various battle scenes. The dominant voice maintains that women, in particular, who are limited to the domestic sphere, may be held responsible for failing to rise beyond ‘the personal episode’ (8) and being blind to the greater sweep of political events.

The muted voice of the poem acts as a counterpoint to the dominant one, and it becomes bolder and braver as the speaker expresses sympathy for Mathilde and her companions. Domestic life may seem calm and pleasurable in comparison to the lives of men in war, but the speaker is unable to ignore the anxiety and anguish that lie underneath the calm exterior, particularly when she portrays Mathilde’s concern that her husband may never return from war. The intimate understanding of the speaker’s tone about the lives and experiences of women is in sharp contrast to the detached tone of the earlier section that portrays women’s lives in abstract terms. Mathilde’s experience is more than ‘a personal episode’ (8) since it represents the lived reality of so many women. Her work reveals both her enormous creative abilities and her frustration at the gender disparity that prevents her from experiencing the same levels of personal freedom as men in many areas of life. The burgeoning feminism in Rich’s poems is evident in her encouragement of the personal feelings and emotions of women in the production of art and her gradual elevation of women’s weaving, a common domestic work, to the status of a valid art form. The common women’s arts are more permanent than the conflict and devastation caused by men. The weaving motif is a prominent one in Rich’s work. As we will see, it appears often in poems like “Natural Resources” and “When We Dead Awaken”, where it serves as a symbol of the nurturing creativity and life-affirming virtues that are commonly associated with women. Rich comes to a mature understanding of the sort of power essential for the survival and progress of the world through her meditations on weaving as a metaphor for everyday female creativity.

Rich’s first book of poetry, *A Change of World*, is distinguished by a dynamic conflict between the dominant voice, which reflects traditional patriarchal ideas, and the muted voice, which represents the seed of Rich’s eventual feminist vision. The dominant narrative emphasises feminine submissiveness, weakness, and a polite demeanour. Despite their modest and feminine features, as well as their seeming satisfaction with passivity, dependency, and limitation, the protagonists of these poems indicate something entirely different. To sum up, these three poems from *A Change of World* represent an early stage in Rich’s progression towards ‘an aesthetics of power’ (Keyes, 28). These poems demonstrate that there is a feminine voice out there, one that is resistant to repression, male authority, and the violence of an invading army. Two of them are about women in creative roles, and they employ

imagery to depict 'the power that the woman artist feels but dares not express overtly, at least in America in 1951' (Keyes, 28). It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Rich's poetry takes on a rebellious tone while expressing these suppressed urges.

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