

Adrienne C. Rich: A Poet and a Political Activist

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Adrienne Rich's (b. May 16, 1929—d. March 27, 2012) poetry is innovative, original and a powerful voice. There are certain strands that persist in her work. She is committed to communitarian welfare, lucid expression, authentic communication and ardently seeks to usher in social change. Her poems are imbued with annoyance at violence and at times she is a woman whose sensitive and romantic, can be easily influenced but she is also bold enough to question and repudiate the male as defined by culture and civilization. She intensely feels with women and even expresses the deprivations they are subject to. Rich's poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tiger" (*A Change of World*) exteriorizes woman who is under a male dominated social set-up. "Final Notations" (*An Atlas of the Difficult World*) expresses the confidence of a woman in her love. "Gabriel" (*Leaflets*) expresses a religious mind with ardent faith in God. Rich oscillates between the particular and the general trends of twentieth century, which are replete with commercialism and social injustices, hence the fountain head of tragic feelings, where the poetess appears as an angel or Della Robia Medonna, Virgin Mary. Rich has delineated an epic of the present times in *Diving into the Wreck*, offering gender's new horizons in relations where sky is the limit. Of course, throughout Rich emerges as a champion of woman, or rather human rights. In fact, the poet has provided a chronicle of the evolving consciousness of the human beings in the contemporary.

Rich has been called as one of the greatest poets of the last century. Many prizes were conferred on her: Guggenheim Fellowship (1952), National Book Award (1974), the inaugural Ruth Paul Lilly Poetry Prize (1986), a Mac Arthur Foundation Fellowship (1994), and the Yale Bollingen Prize (2003). She is also famous for the honours she refused. A thirteen-minute segment in the documentary entitled, *Democracy Now*, concerning Rich's death applauds her for championing the rights of women and LGBTs, and racial desegregation. It also discussed her National Book Award for her collection *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), where she declined to accept the honour alone and invite writers Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker to join her on stage. A quarter of a century later, Rich out rightly rejected the National Medal of Arts (1997), she was alarmed at "the increasingly brutal impact of racial and economic injustice in our country" (Rich, *Arts of the Possible* 99). She went on to read a poem entitled "What Kinds of Times are These" (*Dark Fields of the Republic*). She had her own views regarding the therapeutic power of poetry. It is in a 2006 article in the *Guardian* that Rich says:

There's actually an odd correlation between these ideas: poetry is either inadequate, even immoral, in the face of human suffering, or it's unprofitable, hence useless. Either way, poets are advised to hang our heads or fold our tents. Yet in fact, throughout the world, transfusion of poetic language can and do quite literally keep bodies and souls together—and more (Rich, *Poetry and Commitment* 26).

Take the instance of her twenty fifth book of poetry that opens with her characteristic gorgeous musicality, entitled “Waiting for Rain, for Music,” where the poet says:

Burn me some music *Send my roots rain* I'm swept
 dry from inside Hard winds rack my core
A struggle at the roots of the mind Whoever said
 it would go on and on like this
 Straphangar swaying inside a runway car
 palming a notebook scribbled in
 contraband calligraphy against the war
 poetry wages against itself
 Once under a shed's eaves
 thunder drumming membrane of afternoon
 electric scissors slitting the air (Rich, *Tonight No Poetry* 13).

Rich's poems are great instances of seamless pieces of prosody. Her choices in caesuras, stanza breaks, and line breaks work together to control the pacing and tenor of her poems. The poems come across both as works of oratory and works of art, with felicity of language. Rich's poems written over the course of her 60-year career have weighty political and social import. Rich knows how to make the most of the genre, in order to appeal to the musical year of the reader as also to his humanitarian consciousness. Rich's poems matter because in them the personas and the speakers are not distant voices that call for change. They always have a stake in the issue at hand. It is empathy that is the hallmark of Rich's work which has made her voice an enduring one in the last more than half-century of social change. The volume *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve* contains many poems possessing a voice that is deeply empathetic to the victims of oppression. Take the case of “From Sickbed Shores” that commences with an international perspective:

From shores of sickness: skin of the globe stretches and
 snakes
 out and in room sound of the universe bearing
 undulant wavelengths to an exhausted ear

sick body in a sick country: can it get well? (35).

The first line itself stretches immeasurably to contain wavelengths of all oppressed people's voices. It also stretches physically across the page to make an enjambed snap back to "snakes," which is a dramatically short line. It again stretches snake like into another long line to end with a transitive verb. It is only the third line of the poem and we are already enthralled and snare. Some stanzas later we come across the "sick body" of the planet that possesses stretched skin and "exhausted ear." It is akin to the bound and tortured body of a prisoner:

Wired wrists jerked-back heads
 gagged mouths flooded lungs
 All, all remote and near
 Wavelengths—
 whose? mine, their, ours even
 yours who haven't yet put in a word? (35).

The speaker scarcely possesses ego boundaries that could separate "me" from "us" from "them" that could authenticate the emphatic voice with sincerity. The poem progresses with the speaker addressing the you "who haven't yet put in a word." It compels the reader to reflect whether they have themselves spoken out against oppression or whether theirs is the "body sheathed in indifference" (37). "From Sickbed Shores" is a poem that succeeds in making us feel the plight of the oppressed and protest against their victimization. Otherwise also Rich has provided an entire spectrum of political and social forces, whose catalogue is manifest in "Ballade of the Poverties." The impact of this poem comes through stark visual images of poverty in its many forms, which commences in the following manner:

There's the poverty of the cockroach kingdom and the
 rusted toilet bowl
 The poverty of to steal food for the first time
 The poverty of to mouth a penis for a paycheck
 The poverty of sweet charity ladling
 Soup for the poor who must always be there for that
 There's the poverty of theory poverty of swollen belly shamed
 Poverty of the diploma or ballot that goes nowhere
 Princes of predation let me tell you
 There are poverties and there are poverties (Rich, *Tonight No Poetry*
 55).

The poem also denounces the "Princes of finance" and "Princes of weaponry." It says:

You who travel by private jet like a housefly
 Buzzing with the other flies of plundered poverties
 Princes and courtiers who will never learn through words
 Here's a mirror you can look into: take it: it's yours (56).

Each and every poverty is described in the poem with an image that is revolting/heart breaking. The poet demonstrates the emotional difficulty of the verse lines with a literal difficulty of reading them. Also there is the awkward syntax in the poem of lines like "The poverty of to steal," or "The poverty of to mouth" (55). Such expressions jolt and halt the reading and the reader somewhat stumbles, which is stressed by the interspacing of smooth lyrical lines like "Princes of predation let me tell you/There are poverties and there are poverties." Here, in "Ballade of the Poverties," just as in "From Sickbed Shores" the poet makes the reader directly encounter social and political problems, much as they need sympathetic people like the reader to commit themselves to resolving them. The poems are so gripping that they afford no opportunity to the reader to turn away, since many of us may like to do so.

We come across another such poem, entitled "Scenes of Negotiation." It presents protestors who dedicate themselves to striving against such oppression, even willing to be arrested and maltreated for doing so:

Being or doing: you're taken in for either, or both. Who you were
 born as, what or who you chose or became. Facing moral disorder
 head-on, some for the first time, on behalf of others. Delusion of
 inalienable rights. Others who've known the score all along (Rich, *Tonight No
 Poetry Will Serve* 29).

"From Sickbed Shores" questioned the activism of "you," and the selfsame "you" in this text are the imprisoned protestors. They are identified by the speaker as "what or who you chose or became." It had been for quite some time that Rich had been interested in the issue of choice in identity, since people oppressed due to specific issues like race, poverty, gender or politics do not have an entire range of choices concerning their identity. There are factors that extenuate and narrow the identity choices that non oppressed people possess. Thus, the question of 'How do we choose our identity?' becomes important in such poems. There have been speakers in Rich's poems preceding the present volume i.e. *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve* articulating this scarcity of choice in identity. There was the speaker of the "The Roofwalker," in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* explicitly saying so: "A life I didn't choose/chose me" (193). Also, there was the speaker of "From an Old House in America" in *Poems: Selected and New* saying: "I never chose this place/yet am now of it" (267). Foremost there is the speaker of "Waking in the Dark," in *Diving into the Wreck* who said poignantly:

The thing that arrests me is
 how we are composed of molecules

(he showed me the figure in the paving stones)
 arranged without our knowledge and consent
 like the wirephoto composed
 of millions of dots
 in which the man from Bangladesh
 walks starving
 on the front page
 knowing nothing about it
 which is his presence for the world (7).

Rich addresses poems in the fourth section of the book to Axel Avakar, calling him as “*fictive poet, counter-muse, brother*” is not able to choose who he is or what he does (43). Thus, in “Axel, in Thunder” he remains exposed to the storm, while everyone else takes refuge inside. Thus, he exemplifies lack of choice:

while somewhere in all weathers you’re
 crawling exposed not by choice extremist
 hell-bent searching you soul
 --O my terrified my obdurate
 my wanderer keep the trail (45).

Although, Axel is fictional but he represents innumerable men and women who have no freedom to choose and shape their identity. This poem is succeeded by one, where contrastingly choice is available, the choice of who one is and what one does, since the speaker herself exercises it. “I Was There, Axel,” describes the attempt “to gain a voice,” and convey the “decision.” The speaker explains the process:

Pain taught her the language
 root of *radical*
 she walked on knives to gain a voice
 fished the lake of lost
 messages gulping up
 from far below and long ago
 needed both arms to haul them in
 one arm was tied behind her

the other worked to get it free
 it hurt itself because
 work hurts I was there Axel
 with her in that boat
 working alongside
 and my decision was
 to be in no other way
 a woman (46).

The poem has described a woman who underwent suffering to gain her own voice and now digs up the lost voices. The journey is a long one and the suffering continues. The speaker strives to strongly claim her action and identity which is expressed through the abbreviated expression and elliptical syntax: “and my decision was,” which at first appears to be the “decision” of “working alongside” the character in the boat. It also seems to allude to the decision “to be in no other way/a woman” syntactically and symantically, “the decision” alludes to what the persona is and what she is doing. She is a woman helping other women to raise voices from the silence imposed upon them “from far below and long ago.” Rich has always sympathized with the other people and the power of her poetry lies in this empathy and this communitarian credo.

Rich’s poetry and prose feature the struggles of other people, especially marginalized groups like Jews, including Holocaust victims. As a teenager she saw newsreel footage of World War II concentration camps. The images of stacked bodies and piles of shoes stayed with her. She recounted some of her feelings in *New York Times* in 1987: “I felt I was very special, I felt I was intended to have a wonderful life. And then I thought that every one of those people had also thought that, before they were taken away to the camps” (Rich, *What is Found There* 65). It is in her later poetry that Rich became more introspective, focusing more on personal happiness and spirituality as in *Midnight Salvage* 1999. She always spoke against social injustices and dehumanization in the light of events occurring in the early 21st century as can be evidenced from *The School Among the Ruins* (2004), and *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth* (2009). She herself described the progression of her political philosophy from critical optimist to passionate skeptic, which culminated with neither cynicism nor nihilism. Rich concluded: “Perhaps . . . [that] is the ground for continuing” (Rich, *Arts of the Possible* 73). It was in her essay on Emily Dickinson that Rich elaborated upon her concept of the true poet and his responsibilities:

Poetic language—the poem on paper—is a concretization of the poetry of the world at large, the self, and the forces within the self; and those forces are rescued from formlessness, lucidified, and integrated in the act of writing poems. But there is a more ancient concept of the poet, which is that she is endowed to speak for those who do not have the gifts of language, or to see for those who—for whatever reasons—are less conscious of what they are living through.

It is as though the risks of the poet's existence can be put to some use beyond her survival (Rich, "Vesuvius at Home" 187).

Rich constantly strives to get nearer this ideal. To an extent she has been able to integrate her gift of language with the sense of her mission. She has also been taking risks with end in view. Of course, occasionally, her sense of urgency for the socio-political cause overpowers her concern for aesthetic mastery. Through the years she has exhibited increasing confidence in her tone of strong and calm vision, which would also be seen as her getting nearer her ideal of the poet, announcing a "common language."

The poetry reveals encapsulation of a metaphor of anti-war dissidence as also the version of a home-maker's disastrous marriage. The poet expresses a range of emotions like rage, powerlessness, contempt and entrapment. There is also the allusion to Napalm bombing related not only to the destruction of land and people, but also the fears of bringing impotence upon the victim population. The poem obliquely alludes to the portraits of generals and leaders, may be Nixon is one of them, the stamped faces available on currency notes, betokening passion for war and violence. Rich has comprehensively contributed to the moral life of not just her own country, but the globe itself. Later, she focused on the Sandinista movement and U.S. meddling in Nicaragua. S

Rich is a poet of the polyphonic and the contrapuntal. It is amidst the dialogue of the self that the voice of the other emerges in her poetry. The polyphonic, representative of the voices of the victimized, be it from Vietnam, Nicaragua, or other imperialized spaces is accorded due place in her expression. In Saidian terms, she strives to bring in contrapuntality, where only the bugle of the west sounded. Post Orientalist Said advocated the contrapuntal, instead of the mere adversarial. Rich's work spanning more than six decades of writing in prose and verse comes across as complex and variegated. It convincingly exhibits that the aging activist also constantly appraised the nature and role of poetry itself in political and social life. Her more recent poetry, of the first decade of the present century constantly alludes to the past to reveal and highlight the sordid fact that the unwholesome present is a consequence of the sundry ills of the past. Rich's publications of 2009 and 2012 attempt a blend of socio-political praxis and participation instead of the earlier strands that voiced consciousness of apartheid, isolation and coercion. She eschews sloganeering and the overtly polemical. Her last publication of verse, entitled *Later Poems: Selected and New, 1971-2012*, contains a luminous final section of ten poems, entitled "New and Unpublished Poems 2010-2012." The very last poem is entitled "End Papers" and concludes with an ultimate gesture towards striving and surviving in this world to quest for a method and manner of living, an existence based on mutuality and egalitarianism. The poet says: "The signature to a life requires/the search for a method" (*Later Poems* 512). The most remarkable thing about this last volume is Rich's remarkable consistency of craft, which is a lesser notice fact of her work. Rich has been typecast as a poet of anger, statement and witness. Of course, all these modes of expression have their place in her work, but she has always bothered about the meticulous artistry of her poems. This can be ascertained as an instance from her earlier compositions like "Diving into the Wreck" (*Diving into the Wreck*) or "Power" (*The Dream of a Common Language*). There is a marvel of weavings of harmonious relations between image and

insistence, between voice and music and architectonics of line after line. Rich has been artfully deploying broken spaces on pages, fractured syntax and absent punctuation, signaling stylistic decisions at a very high level. As successive volumes of verse were published, they came across as the unfolding of the history of Rich's poetic independence. It was the age of lyric and Rich did not indulge in a lyric project. In the era of the narrative, she eschewed story telling. Rich's strategy was to present a voice-driven line and virtually stamped it toward a stanzaic drama: "The words are purposes./The words are maps./I came to see the damage that was done/and the treasures that prevail" ("Diving into the Wreck" 23). The poems orchestrate to establish a psychic horizon where the tone unnoticeably slides between the conversational and the oracular.

Rich refused to accept the National Medal for the Arts in 1997 and presented her views in a letter which was later published in *Arts of the Possible*. She said: "I believe in art's social presence—as breaker of official silences, as voice for those whose voices are disregarded, and as a human birthright" (99). She opined that the ethical imagination is the responsibility of the poet and not an option. It is the moral imperative. Rich doubted the progress or the direction that her own nation was taking. In her essay to Raya Dunayevskaya's *Rosa Luxemburg: Women's Liberation and Marx Philosophy of Revolution*, she said: "Capitalism does not mean progress; the civilized are also the damaged" (Rich, "Raya Dunayevskaya's Marx" 94). She presented a similar critique in her *Arts of the Possible*. She said: "Where capitalism evokes freedom, it means the freedom of capital" (56). Rich in "Poetic and Public Sphere," while discussing the plight of poetry in America, in general, critically talks of the extant poetry as filled with "the familiar sameness, the-well-written, capable mediocrity of American middle-ground status-quo poetry" (117). She expects poems to be a dialogue with people's movement across the globe. Rich's poetry brings to mind the work of Lawrence Grossberg who published *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* in 2010. It was in an interview that he traced the aims and subject in the contemporary domain. He said:

Cultural studies chooses to embrace the complexity, to argue that you cannot understand the human world except by mapping the multiplicity of relations that constitute any context, and any event within it. So, rather than looking for *the* answer, rather than thinking dis-junctively (it is either a or b), cultural studies thinks conjunctively (it is a and b and...) (112).

Rich also, in Grossberg's terms thinks "conjunctively." She, in her entire *oeuvre* has striven dynamically towards "mapping the multiplicity of relations." It is this candour in Rich's poetry that gets transferred to the avid reader, and he feels empowered, through the poet's truthfulness, the candid expression and cogent argumentation.

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