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## CONFLICT AND IDENTITY IN ADRIENNE RICH'S POETRY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper would :

- A. define the notion of conflict in and around the life and work of Adrienne Rich;
- B. seek to identify its roots; and
- C. outline her attempts to resolve the conflict via declaration of her sexuality.

It is easy to imagine that there would be multiple conflicts depicted in the poetry of Adrienne Rich. However, the politico-sexual aspect of lesbianism is being focussed upon here for a nuanced study. Rich was one of the towering literary figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and located herself at the intersections of race, gender, queerness, colour and anti-semitist conflicts. Almost entire corpus of her work came out of these strifes and frictions. Her work is a cauldron of the interface of the personal and the public. She harvests her personal conflicts to create poetry of vision, of activism, of revolutionary and radical feminism and lesbian feminism.

## INTRODUCTION

This research paper aims to theorise the social, literary and political "coming out" of Adrienne Rich as a lesbian writer. Through an analysis of her selected poetry, this paper throws light upon the contours of the conflict in her literary and personal life. The paper begins by defining the notion of conflict in and around the life and work of Adrienne Rich through a biographical sketch. Further, it identifies the roots of those conflicts through an analysis of her works, keeping in mind her unique location as a Jew, a privileged White and a poet initially trained under the rigid patriarchal strictures of her father. Lastly, this paper outlines her attempts to resolve the conflict via a declaration of her sexuality. This paper proposes that her act of 'coming out'

as a lesbian can be understood as a volitional step towards her well being.

## BACKGROUND OF THE POET

Born in May 1929 and died in March 2012, Adrienne Cecile Rich is a prolific American poet, essayist and radical feminist. She is one of the most widely read and influential poets of the second half of the 20th century and stands tall as a relevant feminist theorist even today in the 21st century. This is so because Rich did not let the voice of conflict against patriarchy inside her subside and carried it to her poetry. In fact, as it is widely known and experienced, the act of writing out this poetry is a method to come to terms with this conflict. It is also seen in the trajectory of her poetry and in how she outlines and articulates her conflicts repeatedly via several volumes of

poetry. She seems to be fighting against a malaise, which is so widespread that her work seems to have no end and her project is to establish a world that is free of the male desire to get up and kill; free of the male desire to create and perpetuate male desire for inequality (advantageous to himself) and to create a world free of war. It is also noteworthy that she was writing against the Vietnam war. Patriarchy for her was closely linked to the desire for territorial domination, war and capitalism.

Therefore, her literary works include a variety of poems that won several awards. Her career spanned seven decades making her an indelible part of post-war poetry. Her initial poetry was comely, ordered and 'praiseworthy' (her style and craft having been praised by poets and critics of the stature of W. H. Auden) but when her feminine conflicts begin to surface, she turns to blank verse, she develops a unique style where the meaning is not only in the language but also in the writing, that is she writes with unusual gaps in the words and depends largely on the images the words bring up. [The poem Planetarium talks of the presence of a woman in the shape of a monster/ a monster in the shape of a woman].

### **A. Notion of conflict in and around the life and work of Adrienne Rich**

In the Power of Adrienne Rich, biographer Hillary Holladay terms her childhood as "excruciatingly advantaged. Talking about her trauma born out of over expectations and the resultant psychosomatic manifestations, Rich writes in her essay "The Distance Between Language and Violence":

My parents require a perfectly developing child, evidence of their intelligence and culture. I'm kept from school, taught at home till the age of nine. My mother, once an aspiring pianist and composer who earned her living as a piano teacher, need not—and must not—work for money after marriage. Within this bubble of class privilege, the child can be educated at home, taught to play Mozart on the piano at four years old. She develops facial tics, eczema in the creases of her elbows and knees, hay fever. She is prohibited from confusion: her lessons, and accomplishments, must follow a clear trajectory (265).

Thus, the conflict, for Rich came from her wounds of childhood which ironically came from her father's preset or predetermined desire to produce a prodigy and from the emotional absence of her mother. At her birth, her father had planned to confer greatness over her. Therefore, a few days after baby Adrienne's arrival, her father Arnold Rich wrote to his father-in-law "Miss Rich is gradually assuming a human appearance. I think she is going to be quite a girl and I hope that we shall make you proud of her. Rumor about her has it that she was born speaking Greek and Spanish fluently and with a most unusual and polished pianistic technique but I assure you that that is somewhat exaggerated" (Holladay 32).

Despite the wit of the letter, the determination to chart the course of her life is quite apparent to the readers. Her initial and later literary achievements may be credited to her father's mentorship but Rich later admits that her father was a very intense and complicated man. She was to suffer later due to his controlling ways. The conflict in Rich is primarily about the establishment of an identity independent of her patriarchal and controlling father, who would like her to turn her into a prodigy for the appeasement of his ego and would like to keep her dissociated from her Jewish background.

Rich acknowledges that she did not rebel because she did actually like writing and she was able to solve her conflict of choosing to be a pianist or a literary person. Hilary Holladay in her biography of Rich (The Power of Adrienne Rich: A Biography) mentions how the decision of choosing writing over piano had manifested in a dream, where Rich saw her piano turn into a poetry writing table. And although Rich scoffed at the idea of prophetic dreams, still it was a significant sign for her.

### **B. Seeking to Identify the Roots of the Conflict**

To understand the roots of the conflict in Rich's life, a look at the events of Rich's childhood landmarks would reveal her father's devotion to her development and his deep engagement with her academic growth. The harsh fact, as stated by Hilary Holladay in the above-mentioned biography, is that Arnold Rich, the patriarch controlled the lives of his daughter and wife which shaped their lives in subversive ways. Rich has stated that he was not a feminist certainly. He, though, did believe in the achievement of women in arts.

She was writing poetry at the age of four and at the insistence of her father, was copying out passages from the poetry of William Blake and John Keats which

gave her an early sense of rhyme schemes, form and patterns. At the age of six, she had written a fifty-page play on the Trojan war. There had begun a systematic and ceaseless process of instruction and accomplishment. The problem was that Adrienne Rich got little pleasure from the lessons her parents wanted to give her. Her mother (ostensibly under the pressure of Arnold Rich) began giving her piano lessons after placing Plutarch's Lives on the stool on which Adrienne because of her little plump hands could barely reach the piano. The mother was not there to provide any emotional nourishment, which perhaps happened in the kitchen where the cooking maid sang songs while working. Rich has talked of "wonder, grief, fury at the strange mix of unacknowledged suffering that defined her childhood." She also writes that although her father gave her more time than her mother, "his investment in my intellect and talent was egotistical, tyrannical, opinionated, and terribly weary" ( 53). How far she was from her mother shows in her poem "Solfeggietto" (in *In Time's Power: Poems 1985-1988*):

Piano lessons The mother and the daughter

Their doomed exhaustion their common mystery

worked out in finger exercises  
Czerny, Hanon

The Yellow Schirmer albums  
quarter-rests

Double-holds

glyphs of astronomy the mother  
cannot teach

the daughter because that is not the  
story

of a mother teaching magic to her  
daughter

Side by side I see us locked

My wrists your voice are  
tightened

Passion lives in old songs in the  
kitchen

Where another woman cooks  
teaches and sings

Obviously, there is little happiness  
in the "doomed exhaustion" and  
tightened fists.

The mother's lack of participation as per biographical details of Adrienne Rich came from the explicitly imposed patriarchal, Jewish order. The father had presented the mother with a black dress, which she had to wear at all times and was to live like a non-jew in a Jewish household. Initially, it is the father's orders

that helped her learn the craft of poetry at the tender age of 6 and later on it is in the defiance of her father's voice that she begins to move toward finding her identity and begins to embark upon the journey towards the declaration of her identity as a lesbian poet and a lesbian woman. The episode of the seventeen-page long letter, advises Adrienne Rich to not marry Alfred Conrad, a Jew.

Her conflicts and development as a poet and a woman are rooted in her family background and in her Jewish and Protestant mother. These factors had their own tensions and their own conflicts. Her father Dr Arnold Rich was a professor at John Hopkins University and her mother had her training as a concert pianist and a composer. The world that her parents tried to create was a white and a white Christian one. The values that her father expected her to adhere to were Christian or gentile. Her father, though a Jew, denied and ignored Jewishness. Her mother's protestant values complicated the atmosphere further. Her mother trained her to belong to the white class. Her marriage to Dr Conrad at the age of 23 resulted in three children and her induction into motherhood (which was to serve as the main bedrock for her articulations in *Of Woman Born* published in 1976). Her role as a wife, mother and primary caretaker

often conflicted with her role as an artist and a productive poet.

According to Rich, "this opposition occupies many women's lives, for the twentieth century, educated young woman looking perhaps at her mother's lives, or trying to create an autonomous self in a society which insists that she is destined primarily for reproduction, has with good reasons felt that the choice was an inescapable either/or: motherhood or individuation, motherhood or creativity, motherhood or freedom" (Rich 160).

Though Rich realized this, she also knew there was little escape from this struggle. Later on, this struggle was to reveal itself most primarily in her career-defining magnum opus *Of Woman Born* (1976), and poems "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law", "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers". Rich had been trapped in her marriage [despite her love of her offspring, reduced to doing chores and fulfilling patriarchal expectations. Therefore, although her initial verse appears ordered well structured and metrical as per the patterns of Robert Frost, Walt Whitman and many other masculine poetic luminaries, her later poems show the tensions present in the roles chalked out for women in the 1950s and the repressed desires of the protagonist of her poems. The social expectations of the times are

inhibiting. In her childhood, she felt the split of identities through her religion and her position as a dutiful female child, in adulthood as a bound wife.

### **C. Attempts to Resolve the Conflict via Declaration of her New Sexuality**

Cheryl Colby Langdell in her book “Adrienne Rich: The Moment of Change”(2004) observes that,

For her [Rich] a conflict emerges between her perfect public self and what was then called a full life, on the one hand, and her unique carrier as a woman poet; and this conflict dominated her personal life and public poetry. . . . for Rich personally the effort to do everything perfectly herself ended in the feeling that ‘I had either to consider myself as a failed woman and a failed poet,’ or she had to ‘find some synthesis or perspective to enable her to comprehend what was happening to me (ARP 173). Hence, she crafted that synthesis in new poetry of liberation and female consciousness.

In keeping with Langdell’s observation, it was seen that Rich was gradually moving to Lesbianism after her husband Alfred’s shocking suicide. Although she missed Alfred often she was clear that she

necessarily did not want to be with him. The initial depression was full of ideas about loneliness but even when she was around people the desire to establish her identity and a search to be herself was the biggest mental preoccupation. The ideas that largely occupied her head were sex and power, their interrelations and so on. So, consequently treading along this journey of revolution and self-discovery, she put her newfound freedom and privacy to good use and turned into a voracious reader. She ardently read Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson, the high priestesses of feminist freedom and thought.

She sought to resolve her conflict via a strong resolve and efforts towards building alliances with female intellectuals and minds of high calibre. She wrote letters to poets and authors. In this process of ‘coming out’ as a lesbian (so far an unconscious process for her), she scouted for journals that were feminist however small, unconventional or unknown. She also consciously sought lesbians as intellectual peers and wrote to Deming, Daly and to the fiction writers Tillie Olsen, who was not a lesbian but a feminist. She was continuously expanding the arena of her sexual/political conversation and discourse. She also wrote to Kathleen Fraser who spoke of the concept of ‘a real femaleness’. Such interactions gave her hope as well as a reason to exist in the

bleak aftermath of her husband's suicide. Now her mind was absorbing a lot of unrestrained images of which many were not good yet they gave her many possibilities. The condition of loneliness brought her back to the intellectual mental soil for which she had been happily or unhappily groomed as a child.

She made a significant move in her sexual politics by publishing "Diving into the Wreck" (1971-72) and she said that the poems were "a coming-home to the darkest and richest source of my poetry: sex, sexuality, sexual wounds, sexual identity, sexual politics: many names for pieces of one whole" (Holladay 66) It is during the writing of these poems, that the possibilities of lesbianism began to firm up.

In poems such as "Trying to Talk with a Man," "When We Dead Awaken," "The Phenomenology of Anger," "For a Survivor," and "August," she shared the raw pain of her life as a heterosexual woman who tried and failed to connect with men. (294 Therefore till the seventies, she was not a lesbian or had not come out. She began going deep into feminist politics and according to Holladay she "was waiting, it seems, for the right woman to lead her out of her liminal state of half-articulated desire. " (287) Rich developed a supportive friendship with

Cheryl Walker, a young, bright, warm, affectionate and a daughter-like poet. Rich put her poems to sharp feminist analysis. This interaction benefitted both of them emotionally. Rich also reviewed Midge Dector's *The New Chastity and Other Arguments*

Against Women's Liberation in *The New York Review of Books* and developed the discourse of the matriarchal notions of the onset of civilisation. Rich opined that Dector's writing lacked vitality and a work where the women were being preached against temptation. This motivated Rich to do otherwise in her book "Of Woman Born" and not make the mistake that Dector had. Her personal truth of having been radicalised by motherhood was apparent throughout the book and the conflicts and predicaments that articulate her conflict. Rich interacted with Phyllis Chesler in New York and saw that "her groundbreaking feminist study, *Women and Madness* had gone virtually unnoticed by the press." (Holladay, 289). She published a review in 1972 making Chesler's book a bestseller. In reviewing she herself gained insights into sexual ideologies based on masculine notions and where she realised that "woman had to be made over by a man in order to become acceptable to him"? ("Beyond Psychology")



In her process of coming out, she broke her relations with many men, among whom was her long-cherished friend Hayden Carruth in February 1973. Significantly, in an event at Harvard's Signet Club, which was earlier an only men's society, Rich was to read from her poetry but walked out without reading from her poetry as she concluded by the humour and speaker before her that it was still a male-dominated club. Around 1973 and in the year following the publication of *Diving into the Wreck*, she commented on uncaring men and lukewarm and ineffective feminists "Until those men who think of themselves as civilized liberals examine the fear and hatred of women underlying their jokes and amusements, they will go on perpetuating a puerile and false virility in themselves and their sons. Until elite women begin to protest the reification and devaluation of women in general, their influence and dignity in male institutions will always be at the mercy of misogyny which can break through even the most cultivated and civilized veneer." She showed them although she herself belonged to the ruling class, she could no longer be a part in the sense of not being sensitive to sexist jokes about women and casual anti-feminism.

Rich was becoming impatient with men and was thinking of sexual fluidity

and androgyny. The evidence is her poem "The Stranger":

I am the androgyne

I am the living mind you fail to describe

in your dead language

the lost noun, the verb surviving

only in the infinitive

the letters of my name are written under the lids

of the newborn child

The persona of Rich's poem, who is only thinly veiled as Rich, refuses a fixed sexual identity. Her evolution is evident here. It was fuelled by Anthony Burgess, who had rented Rich's personal apartment when she had been away on an academic sojourn. He damaged the apartment in many offensive ways and refused to pay for the damages and later wrote a misogynistic novel (*The Clockwork Testament*) making Rich's house the setting for it and ascribed man hating books and tendencies, racism and humourlessness to her. Burgess did that because Rich did not bow to him. Writers like Burgess did not want poets like Rich to question their authority so they wanted her to vanish. Men like John Simon, a Harvard graduate student turned reviewer,

made fun of her poetry. R.W. Flint did not like her poetry on sexist grounds. Instead of vanishing, Rich went on to achieve higher fame with the publication of works like *Diving into the Wreck*.

The seventies was the time when women's music and women's stores were coming up, Rich saw the spaces where women were missing. History was such a place. So books were her Gods to affect their presence. Holladay writes of Rich,

History as she had previously conceived it gives way to "a book of myths," a term that conjures not only archetypal truths but also lies and omissions. Whatever it may say, true or untrue, the book of myths matters: Along with her other tools of exploration, she takes it with her as she pursues a new understanding of the world and her place in it. Perhaps she will check her discoveries against its contents or look for ways to incorporate its lessons into a more inclusive vision of the past . . .

(24)

The place of women must be recovered, even after fearful descents into the wreckage, where Rich becomes both mermaid and merman. ( in *Diving* she says, "I am she: I am he") Having been reviewed in a hostile manner by many

male critics and lauded by female ones, Rich was able to counter hostility ( by the likes of Harvey Shapiro in *The Times* and William Pritchard in *The Hudson review*). Rich was bringing inspiration to women and her work was to be the vanguard of feminism. Elaine Showalter coined the term "gynocriticism" and recalled, "Adrienne's books were the edge of where the women's movement was going, where I saw my life going." Rich was experiencing new fame. Joan Nestle, a lesbian activist described Rich as full of grace and power. Rich, in the mid-seventies, became the nation's leading feminist poet. At the National Book Award ceremony, she decided to accept the award with two more women poets and on behalf of all the women on the planet.

In her speech, she had given the hint of a new identity, the one of a lesbian. Her companion in the award ceremony, Audre Lorde was now a lesbian, had divorced her husband and had taken a woman as a lover. Rich herself had a lesbian lover, her psychiatrist, Lilly Engler, even if one were to suspect it as a case of transference. This pairing with Engler changed things for the heterosexual Rich. Holladay writes

[ She adored Lilly's "beautiful, swift, searching mind" and her physicality; she exulted over her lover's generous embrace

of life. Though in recent times she had wanted to find a man who possessed the qualities she admired in women, she now realized that Lilly offered her every kind of fulfilment, physical and otherwise. Passionately in love, she swelled with emotion unknown to her since her earliest days of dating Conrad. She felt both grounded and aloft, amazed by the "serious joy"- that buoyed her days] (313 Holladay]

The poem "Twenty One Love Poems", which defined her as a lesbian and completed her coming out was published in the collection "The Dream of a Common Language" in 1974. The section The Floating Poem, Unnumbered ends with "... whatever happens, this is." signalling the vulnerability and finality of the poetic persona's physical and emotional union with her woman lover.

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