

*Re-writing History, Gender, and Language:
A Critical Study of Adrienne Rich*

A SHORT ABSTRACT
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by

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This research project undertakes to analyze/study the vast oeuvre of Adrienne Rich's poetry and prose in the context of how she re-writes and re-conceptualizes history, gender and language in her writings. Chapter 1 foregrounds the concatenation of ideas and theories current in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century up to the seventies. It is divided into two parts – 'A' and 'B'. Part A takes into account the latter half of the nineteenth century, which witnessed rapid changes as new discoveries, theories and ideas circulated in the social cauldron. Amongst others, they affected women also, who began to question their marginalized status under patriarchy. After this, a history of feminism is undertaken. In its early stages, it concerned itself with women as a social group sharing common interests. Therefore, the focus was on securing equal status with men in all spheres of life. Writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Mona Caird in England championed the cause of women. A discussion of their writings forms the history of early feminism. In their involvement with feminism, women had to define what being a woman meant, what were her interests, her position in the social hierarchy, and whether she was capable of demanding her rights as a human being or not. They had to address the paradoxes in their lives where they had an entity but no being and where they were idealized yet marginalized. They were left without a say or voice even in matters that concerned them.

In 19th century America, writers such as Margaret Fuller and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and activists such as Elizabeth Stanton and others interrogated gender hierarchies. However, the first wave of feminism did not succeed in achieving real benefits for women. In the first half of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf in England and Simone De Beauvoir in France pursued the 'woman's question' in their writings. The political activism of feminism saw a break in its momentum during and after the World Wars. It resumed in the sixties and seventies in America. In France, writers like Michelle Le Doeuff, Monique Wittig, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Helen Cixous occupied themselves with women's issues from the psycho-analytic point of view.

Part B of the chapter deals with the Second Wave of feminism beginning in the nineteen sixties in U.S. At this time, intellectual activity increased and women writers published many polemical works. The writers considered are Mary Ellman, Kate Millett, Patricia

Meyer Spacks, Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow etc.

The manner in which Adrienne Rich re-writes history in her poetry and prose forms the discussion in Chapter two. She discovers that history has been written from the perspective of man, that is, male, while women are conspicuously absent from it. In her search for a female past, she explores the reasons behind this erasure of women's contribution to history. She also brings to bear upon history a re-visioned analysis. She has to revise those fundamental categories of thought, which affect critical thinking and govern attitudes of the people. For her, the engagement with history also means a transition from responsibility towards her own self to a larger one of the community. Her themes are new, and so are her forms. Traditional archetypal myths are interrogated and re-visioned. She historicizes her times and her poetics is rightly called the "poetry of witness". The inclusion of other voices in her poems reflects her movement towards collectivity and commonality.

The third chapter concerns itself with Rich's re-writing of gender. Biographical details are used to indicate how her consciousness of gender shapes her genre. Her increasing consciousness as a woman and an artist makes her aware of the split within her. Her marriage and subsequent motherhood increased her dissatisfaction with traditional female roles inscribed by patriarchy. Her divided self seeks reconnection through writing of subversive poetry. The early formal style is cast away and she adopts a new one, which best expresses her irresolution's and feelings. She also begins to use her own experiences as materials for her poetry. In doing so, she challenges accepted gender roles and transcends their authority over her life. She also locates the confidence to speak in her own voice.

She desires to bring together "the political world 'out there' ... and the supposedly private, lyrical world of sex and of male/female relationship" (*Blood, Bread and Poetry* 181). Her outward movement is best reflected in *The Dream of a Common Language*. She establishes a dialogic space in which she can converse with different voices. Her frank admission of lesbian love in "The Twenty-One Love Poems" breaks the silence cast over such relationships. Her poetics are one of transgression and resistance. In her latest anthology *The School Among the Ruins*, she is disturbed by questions of dislocations in life. She has also moved away from the monolithic character that feminism has begun to acquire. It has been appropriated by the increasing commercialization of the times and devolved into talk shows and chats on TV. There is emphasis on the private life of the individual as separate from the public.

Chapter 4 analyzes the different linguistic strategies adopted by Rich in order to re-write language. But her problem in expressing her doubts and dislocations is compounded by their articulation in a language which is neither adequate nor charged with meaning to bring about understanding. In the use of a personal voice, Rich breaks free from masculinist modes of writing. Her purpose in re-visioning language is more than one. It enables the poet to construct her identity as a speaking subject as well as foreground the importance of resisting assumptions of universalism (which generally meant non-female). It is also flexible enough to permit interaction between other voices and ideas.

It is able to express the experiences of and speak for women, and at the same time effect changes in the reader thereby re-fashioning the consciousness of the age. The poet's desire to achieve a common language defines a new poetic tradition, which reveals the promise of animating a female culture and validating the experiences of women. However, the fact remains that in spite of re-visioning language, patriarchal accretions of the connotations of words remain and she can never be free of these linguistic anxieties.

The last chapter attempts to re-locate the writings of Rich in the emerging feminist poetic tradition. It is true that she has tried to create an ethos, which validates itself by engaging in a dialectics of inquiry and investigation of history, gender, language, ideology, and authority. It renews itself continually by interrogating its own premises and the 'givens' of thought and action, and finally emerging with transformed meanings.