

Review

Adrienne Rich's "*Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*": A study

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Adrienne Cecile Rich (1929-2012) comes before the readers as the most promising poet and essayist in contemporary American literature. She is a multi-talented writer, polemist, literary theorist and an exponent of a poetry of witness and dissent, a poetry that voices the discontent of those generally silenced and ignored. She is a political poet whose ideology is rooted in early American experience. Her prophecy of the community of women and of female energy free from patriarchal repression parallels the Puritan vision. She urges the world to open its gates to everyone regardless of gender, race, or class, and feels that the feminist vision of the community of women would be the beginning of a new chapter in American history. In the present paper, a study has been made on Adrienne Rich's *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, an overtly feminist poem that stands out as a watershed in her poetic development.

Key words: Contemporary American Literature, multi-talented writer, political poet, gender, race, feminist vision.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of American Literature, poetry arose first with the efforts made by the early colonists who tried their best to add their voices to English poetry in the seventeenth century. Unsurprisingly, their poetry often relied on contemporary British models such as poetic form, diction and theme. But in the nineteenth century, a distinctive American idiom began to emerge with the solid contribution made by Walt Whitman who won an enthusiastic audience, not only in the United States but also abroad.

In the twentieth century, American poetry was strengthened by Ezra Pound and Thomas Stearns Eliot. They became the most influential avant-garde English Language poets during World War I. By the 1960s, young poets in America looked to their contemporaries and predecessors as models for the kind of poetry they wanted to write. The poetry of the 1970s saw a revival of interest in surrealism with the most prominent poets like Andrei Codrescu, Russell Edson and Maxine Chernoff.

In the same period, poetry also embraced multiculturalism with the writings of African American poets namely Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Ishmael Reed, and Nikki Giovanni who came from a multiplicity of cultures. Even women poets like Adrienne Rich, Jean Valentine, and Amy Gerstler came forward and wrote poetry that deals with redemption, suffering and survival.

Born in 1929, Rich grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, the daughter of Arnold Rice Rich, a renowned pathologist, and Helen Elizabeth Rich, a concert pianist and composer. Her early poetic influence stemmed from her father who encouraged her to read and also to write her own poetry. Her interest in literature was sparkled within her father's library where she read the work of writers such as Arnold, Blake, Keats, Rossetti, Tennyson, and Ibsen. She has published more than 18 volumes of poetry and 4 books of non-fiction. She was the recipient of nearly every major literary award including the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award (1951), the National

Book Award for Poetry (1974), the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize (1986), the Fellowship of the Academy of American Poets (1992), the Dorothea Tanning Prize for mastery in the art of poetry given by the Academy of American Poets (1992), and the MacArthur Fellowship (1994), Lannan Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award (1999) Lifetime Recognition Award from the Griffin Poetry Prize (2010).

Rich writes about identity, sexuality, politics, social justice, anti-war movement, and radical feminism. She has been called “one of the most widely read and influential poets of the second half of the 20th century” (Cary, 2000) and is credited with bringing “the oppression of women and lesbians to the forefront of poetic discourse” (Alison, 2012). She is indeed an inspiring cultural force and was one unafraid of diving into the wreck, a bold, outspoken poet of the present times. She feels that an alternate model of re-visioning history and old texts, accompanied by renaming with a fresh eye, would chalk out new territories for women to explore in their writings. While male writers were engrossed in conforming to their own constructions and patterns, to analyze political problems, socio-economic disturbances or acts of violence from a rationale male perspective, women would clearly understand them from gendered humanitarian grounds. Through her poems she “attempted to create positive, public images of women to counteract the distortions wrought by the male gender” (Wendy, 1984).

Rich’s early works such as *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters, and Other Poems* (1955) echoed the voices of the major poets of the first half of the twentieth century, including W.H. Auden, but by the 1960s (particularly with the publication of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” in 1963) Adrienne R (2006) her poetry reflected more personal explorations and departed from the formalism of her previous art. She grew politically aware and her work became increasingly radical in both its free-verse form and feminist and political content, and spoke to women’s themes. Her works from this period, *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Leaflets* (1969) and *Will to Change* (1971) reflect an evolving, expanding sense of poetic form and social engagement. In 1974, her collection *Diving Into the Wreck* received the National Book Award. Rich, however, refused the award individually, instead joining with two other female poets (Alice Walker and Audre Lorde) to accept it on behalf of all silenced women. Rich’s feminist position crystallized in her self-declaration as a lesbian, in 1976, the year she published her controversial but groundbreaking volume of *Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. The pamphlet *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1977), which was incorporated into the following year’s *Dream of a Common Language* (1978), marks the first direct treatment of lesbian desire and sexuality in her work. The subsequent *A Wild Patient has taken me this Far* (1981) and some of the late poems in *The Fact of a Doorframe* (2001) represent the capstone of this philosophical and

political position. Dinah (2009) aptly remarks thus:

Rich’s volumes through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s keep pace with her own increasing politicization and involvement with first the anti-war movement, and then lesbian/feminist political, typically juxtaposing scenes of domestic life with reminders of horrifying instances of history (Dinah, 2009).

Throughout her career, she has been active in the women’s movement, the promotion of civil rights and anti-war activities. Much of her poetry reflects these concerns. In the words of Nina (1998),

A multitalented writer, polemist, and literary theorist, Adrienne Cecile Rich is an exponent of a poetry of witness and dissent, a poetry that voices the discontent of those generally silenced and ignored (Nina, 1998).

She has encouraged people to question their beliefs, and in many of her poems Rich analyses herself, reflecting on such subjects as her Jewish heritage, myth, and the historical development of women, homosexuality, and the politics of oppression.

Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law is Rich’s first overtly feminist poem, which stands as a watershed in her poetic development. It is a powerful and angry poem that makes an important statement about Rich’s feminism. She wrote this poem over a period of two years when she was married to a Harvard Economist and was a young mother with three children like the daughter-in-law in the poem. It expresses her interest in resisting and rebelling both as a woman and as a poet. She writes of women whose gifts have been buried and aborted and whose very beings have been thwarted and silenced. It depicts a woman of the period of transition, especially the sixties and seventies, when women had become conscious of the many reactions and burdens imposed upon them by the male-dominated society, family, culture, and literature. The speaker in the poem sees herself as a daughter-in-law without a personal identity of dignity, or as a person who exists in relation to others and structures. That is why, due to her frustrations and anxiety, she is aggressive. This sense of frustrations, guilt, and suppressed anger is a major theme of the poem. It also discusses how men have long suppressed women by denying the possibility that they might possess any exceptional talent or passion for anything other than housework.

The poem is divided into ten sections and its interpretation can begin even in the title. The title “*Snapshots*” suggests carelessly taken photographs of family members at unguarded moments. They have none of the studied formality of photographs taken in a studio or by a professional photographer. “*Daughter-in-law*” is an intriguing term. Rich chooses a “daughter-in-law,” as the focus of the poem rather than sister, daughter or any of numerous other female roles because the opposition

between the young woman and her mother-in-law presents an effective vehicle for comparing the status of women in their respective generations. In representing generational disparity with a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship, however, Rich establishes the connection between her women through their relations with men; namely, the son and husband. In other words, through the example of a female relationship, that is, the product of interaction with men, Rich effectively demonstrates the magnitude of the male influence over the lives and even the relations between women—female slavery. According to Mary Ellen Snodgrass (2012),

Through Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law Rich gained national prominence, in part because of the accomplishment of her lyric voice, mostly in free verse, and in part because of her treatment of feminist-related themes ((Ellen, 2012).

The first part of the poem shows a rapid change that takes place in the daughter-in-law. She repudiates the mother-in-law for making her life miserable and also meaningless. She feels that the mother-in-law is an agent of limitation in her life and prospects. The daughter-in-law used to be lovely and fresh when she was young, but now her marriage and motherhood have befallen her. She structures her thoughts according to emotions or experiences. Her mind is fertile but she is unable to utilize it. She is an educated woman but is seen making coffee or 'dusting everything on the whatnot everyday of life'. Earlier, rumors and suspicious beset her mind. The belle of Shreveport has denied her own potential by conforming to romantic feminine ideals and is now moldering away like the remnants of her wedding cake.

Rich uses a simile, "a moldering like wedding cake" here. The woman who has once a beauty finds that her mind is now crumbling and rotting like wedding cake. The simile points out that the woman's mind and the cake are equally fragile and equally susceptible to decay. The words 'heavy' and 'rich' carry on the simile. Wedding cake is rich and heavy on the stomach; similarly, the woman's mind is heavy with rumors and suspicions. From the observations that Rich's fiction mother-in-law "still has her dresses copied from that time" and that her mind is "crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge of mere fact" it is evident that this woman has neither the chance nor the ambition to escape from this existence. Her daughter-in-law is acutely aware of the bonds that keep her chained to domestic tasks ("wiping the teaspoons"). The angels urge her to 'save herself' and grow away from her mother-in-law.

In the second stanza, Rich uses domestic metaphors to illuminate the torturous and slave-like aspect of what she terms in her essay "all enforced conditions under which women live subject to men" Adrienne Rich, 1993. She imagines the woman to be hearing 'probably angels' who

tell her to be impatient, to be insatiable, and to save herself because she cannot save others. The angels in the house tell her that the woman is barely conscious of hurting herself in the hot water from the tap or the fire from a matchstick or the steam from a kettle. But the angels say to her that she is already so emotionally and perhaps even physically bruised and battered that 'nothing hurts her anymore.'

In the third section, Rich speaks of the old argument about women's nature. She says that women are biologically inferior, the weaker sex. For a 'thinking woman' as Rich notes, her menial labor is enough to cause nightmares ('Sleeps with monsters'). Even thoughts of death may be inferred from the poem. "The beak that grips her" implies that women are in fact keeping themselves trapped out of fear of alienation. In other words, the role of women is governed by social restrictions which have been dictated by men. The author emphasizes this submission to convention by listening to the contents of Nature's "streamer-trunk of temporal and mores" (times and customs). The objects that are commonly supposed to represent femininity, such as flowers and 'female pills' (menstruation pills) conspicuously hide the 'terrible breasts of Boadica,' that represent women's real power and strength. Instead of attacking the true enemy, man, women waste much of their energy attacking each other, like furies deprived of their rightful quarry.

In the fourth stanza, Rich imagines the life of another thinking woman, Emily Dickinson and a favorite of hers. This nineteenth-century reclusive American poetess lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, all her life. Rich says that in spite of Dickinson's genius she could not prevent herself from being saddled with the housework like every other woman. One of her poems begins with the line 'My Life has stood a loaded gun' – yet for all her genius, she was surrounded not by fellow poets and writers, but by pans containing boiling jellies, by dusters and by irons – household paraphernalia.

In the fifth section, the woman is trying to conform to the patriarchal stereotype of the sweetly smiling, softly speaking lady shaving her legs so that her body hair does not disturb the men's delicate sensibilities. But even as she shaves her legs, she is aware that they shine like the tusks of a dead, prehistoric animal, the mammoth. In other words, she realizes that by conforming to male stereotypes of women, she is trying to conform to something outdated and lifeless, something that denies her own individuality.

In part six, Rich suggests that women are somehow always positioned outside the hub of things as a creature only to love and serve and perhaps see to the household accounts – men, nature's 'superior' creations. Nature is personified as a woman, with grown sons and all women are her daughters-in-law rather than her daughters. Corinna denies her own talents to sing the words and music of men. But Rich expresses her regret that Corinna is seduced by images of beauty perpetrated by the

patriarchal psyche¹. Through this image, Rich is suggesting that patriarchal tradition has always seen women in a subordinate position to men and that they have presented this subordinate position as something natural than something created. Being ironic, Rich does not believe in these myths propagated by patriarchy and interrogates the superiority of males in the so-called patriarchal society.

In the seventh section, Rich writes about how women struggle against great odds to make a significant contribution to civilization given by ugly labels. Their contribution is undermined because they do not conform to patriarchal notions of the woman's fit place – that is, in the house, tending to her husband and children. She demonstrates the calumny of men against one such 'special' woman whose intelligence and ambition they find threatening – Mary Wollstonecraft, author of "Thoughts on the education of Daughters." Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley's mother, ignored attempts to distort and diminish her achievements and challenged serial conventions that undervalued the intelligence of women. She who wrote Frankenstein 'fought with what she partly understood,' namely the societal conventions that restricted the education of woman, and achieved much. However, for her accomplishments she faced the jealousy, and, therefore, the scorn of men: "Few men about her world or could do more, hence she was labeled harpy, shrew and whore" (996). A 'harpy,' in ancient Greek and Roman Stories, is a cruel creature with a woman's head and body and a bird's wings and feet. Sometimes, the term 'harpy' is also used to refer to 'a cruel woman' and is supposed to signify greed. A 'shrew' is an offensive term used for a woman who is regarded as quarrelsome, nagging or ill-tempered.

In the eighth section, Rich, referring to Diderot (1759)² who said "You all die at 15" (cited in Paul, 2003), speaks of how women do in fact die at fifteen in a certain sense – their dreams die, their selfhood dies. They become partly conventional and partly legend – that is, their sense of their own reality is sapped. They cannot change their lives. They merely wish for change. They dream of lost opportunities – "all that we might have been." And the reality of what they are, "fire, tears, wit, taste, martyred ambition," stirs within their sagging middle aged chest.

In the ninth stanza, Rich says that certain women have been comfortable with the role and image patriarchy has given them. They have been content with 'mere talent' and have not been too ambitious. She speaks of how

women have been duped by flattery into accepting their own mediocre work. Flattery has prevented them from striving to achieve something tremendous. Only a few heroic women opted for tremendous work, facing men. She notes that there are 'few applicants' for the 'honor' of becoming a martyr, or allowing her work to be martyred, as a result of male division.

Rich ends the last section of the poem in a more hopeful note by prophesying that the woman of the future will be 'more merciless to herself than history' – she will be hard on herself, harder even than history. She says this new woman will be 'at least as beautiful as any boy/or helicopter.' This implies that the woman will be part machine, part boy. In other words, her sex and her humanness will have to be changed in certain respects. It also asserts that women should not settle for mediocrity and a world where 'time is male,' articulating a vision of thinking woman who no longer 'sleeps with monsters.' Rich optimistically predicts a future 'delivered, palpable, ours,' leaving listeners with a clear understanding of Rich's anticipation of a society that does not oppress women.

Thus, Rich's "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" is a ten-part poem, with each part composed of an uneven number of lines and stanzas. In each part, the speaker refers or alludes to a literary passage or phrase. The references provide Rich with a foundation for a philosophical discussion with the two women – mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Her tone is far more straight forward, wounded, embittered, and a mixture of sympathy and outrage toward the woman who is an accomplice in the denial of her own life. Throughout the poem, one can see the truth of Rich's words – women now increasingly opt for a career, some of them dress like men, and many ignore the conventional roles which society has given them as wife and mother and homemaker. They are like a helicopter in the sense that they fly, they conquer new worlds, and also they have a little bit of the machine in them. Rich is also suggesting that women have to cut themselves off from the nurturing role (domestic instincts) given them by history and create a new function for themselves. Otherwise, a clear break with the past and women's freedom will not be possible. Her cargo will be women's freedom. The elements of nature, the sea and the wind will also recognize the ability of this new woman – the air is described as 'wince(ings)' under the impact of the new woman's blades. She indulges in long pauses throughout the reading, suggesting indignation and seeking to convince the audience of the importance of initiating change in the name of women whose existence has been stifled by male-dominated convention.

Each of Rich's "Snapshots" runs like a common thread – the power of men to suppress women, whether physically, intellectually or emotionally – and offers listeners a snapshot of each woman's story. Even the frustration is revealed in the snapshots where the speaker bangs the coffee-pot into the sink and sneaks moments to read while "waiting/for the iron to heat," or "while the jellies boil

¹ Corinna or Korinna is an Ancient Greek poet, teacher, and rival to the better-known Theban poet Pindar. Thomas Campion wrote a poem entitled "When to her lute Corinna Sings" describing Corinna's feelings and emotions. It speaks about Corinna and her singing combined with playing of the lute. It links and correlates the ways of her lute music to her actual feelings and emotions, saying that her music reflects those things.

² In October 1759, Denis Diderot, famed French philosopher, wrote to his young friend Sophie Volland the poignant words, "you all die at 15." He was clarifying his feelings on what it meant to be passing through, what in those days was known as early adulthood.

and scum.” Rich says that she found this poem to be a relief to write because through this work she allowed herself freely to discuss on feminism.

Conclusion

To conclude, one may say that the poem continues to be essential writing in the ongoing feminist struggle in the United States and throughout the world. Michael Klein (1999) says thus:

Concentrating on the societal status of women in general and lesbians in particular, her (Rich) poetry had evolved into the passionately political force for moral good that it is today (Michael Klein, 1999).

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