

Adrienne C. Rich: A Cultural Poet

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Abstract: *Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) seems to stand in consonance with thinkers of Cultural Studies like Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige and many others who realized the power of the working class, as an agency of resistance to the prevalent ideology. She like them sees culture as venue to spread ideology and to resist it. Thus, deep understanding of Rich's works reveals them to be an ideological struggle with a aim to empower the powerless. In her poetry of 90's Rich was at the zenith of her creative powers and her work was diverse and variegated, encompassing a host of themes. She keenly strove to fulfill her aim of the enfranchisement of the deprived, employing sundry poetic skills and multiple technical strategies. Her poetry provides a vision of an emergent and emancipated way of living in the world, as well as relating. Rich has comprehensively contributed to the moral life of not just her own country, but the globe itself to others. Rich's poetry brings to mind the work of Lawrence Grossberg who published Cultural Studies in the Future Tense in 2010. Rich also, in Grossberg's terms thinks "conjunctively." She expects poems to be a dialogue with people's movement across the globe.*

Key Words: *Ideological struggle, emancipation, liberation, conjunctively, socio-political and topical poetry, "a great work of art," preoccupation with the have-nots in Rich's writings, reprimands the imperialist masters.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Adrienne Cecile Rich (b. May 16, 1929—d. March 27, 2012) has been a major American poet, essayist, cultural critic, and avid activist. She wrote profusely and comprehensively on an array of topics in prose and verse for more than six decades. She provided impetus to change wherever possible both through the composition of poems as also her essays in prose, stressing upon socio-economic, political and environmental justice, envisioning an egalitarian world. Gradually, the poet became inseparable from her whole range of socio-political concerns, as she poured forth in poem after poem and volume and volume. Her *oeuvre* bears ample testimony to this fact as also the fact that seldom in the history of letters do we come across a person possessed of such commingling of powers of expression and gathering such a large number of otherwise different and disparate readers. Thus, she is read deeply and missed widely. Rich's inaugural volume came out in the early fifties. These were poems embellished with formal skill. Her debut publication *A Change of World* was selected by W.H. Auden for the Yale Younger Poets prize. She was then only an undergraduate. Some of the poems were carefully wrought works and remain prescribed for graduate study even today. Rich gathered acclaim from the time her *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) was published. This was her earliest collection where she strove to highlight the contradictions of American life, the problems in her own life who was multitasking as an American poet, an intellectual, a married woman, and above all a mother. In the eponymous poem of the volume she remembers women writers of the earlier times who were similarly preoccupied, and among them she thinks of the poet Emily Dickinson. The poem tellingly enumerates the chores and the daily grind:

Knowing themselves too well in one another:
 their gifts no pure fruition, but a thorn,
 the prick filed sharp against a hint of scorn . . .
 Reading while waiting
 for the iron to heat,
 writing, *My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—*
 in that Amherst pantry while the jellies boil and scum,
 or, more often,
 iron-eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird,
 dusting everything on the whatnot every day of life (Rich, "Snapshots" *Collected Early Poems* 146).

2. RICH AS POET:

Her works constitute a continuity, where volumes of verse reveal a gradual change in lexical items and stylistic devices. She began with the inaugural formal and the well-crafted verse, which was imitative of the

Audenesque, including the personal and the allegorical. It was a little later that she developed a crusading voice to herald reform, grappling with social issues, philanthropic concerns, and above all the virtues of pacifism. Initial years of Rich's life were filled with the destruction of her married life through the suicide of her husband and more perturbation through Sylvia Plath's suicide at the age of thirty-three. She was single-handedly rearing up her three children in addition to nourishing her poetry, while her mind was filled with questions of maternal abandonment. She was further shocked when she learnt of the death of her favourite poet Anne Sexton at the age of forty six. Sexton was her favourite because being a former fashion model with little higher education, afflicted with mental illness and confined largely to her house Sexton had managed to become a Pulitzer Prize winning poet. This must have aroused much optimism in Rich, which was severely shaken when she learned of the fact of Sexton's suicide, and in Rich's mind feelings of betrayal concatenated with the ideas of paternal abandonment because of the suicide of her husband, after the birth of her third child. Late sixties revealed a Rich struggling with ailments like rheumatoid arthritis, which was joined by the problem of macular degeneration that hampered her reading, writing and daily activities.

Rich all through her life attempted to comprehend the intricacies of poetry-writing and the views of others on the subject. She repeatedly went through Vladimir Mayakovski's *How Are Verses Made?* Which contains a plethora of propositions as well as insights concerning the aesthetic and the political imperatives. It is quite possible that Rich may have come across the passages like the following:

To understand the social command accurately, a poet must be in the middle of things and events. . . . Rhythm is the fundamental force, the fundamental energy of verse. You can't explain it, you can only talk about it as you do about magnetism or electricity (Mayakovski 87).

3. CULTURAL HERITAGE:

Critical heritage of Rich's poetry shows her to be a world acclaimed most read and appreciated American poet. A worth mentioning one such notable critic here is W.H. Auden who has applauded Rich's *A Change of World*, and in the "Foreword" praises Rich for her "craftsmanship." He says:

. . . it is evidence of a capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible. Craftsmanship includes, of course, not only a talent for versification but also an ear and an intuitive grasp of much subtler and more difficult matters like proportion, consistency of diction and tone, and the matching of these with the subject at hand; Miss Rich's poems rarely fail on any of these counts (Auden, "Foreword" iv).

Another critic Craig Werner had highlighted Rich's articulation of the experience of life most authentically and aesthetically, calling it "a powerful commitment to the re-vision of lived experience and aesthetic expression. . . . [It is] intensely personal and increasingly political" (Werner 1).

The relevance of cultural criticism in Rich's poetry and prose is equally appreciable. Rich always strove against the overarching idea of wholesale homogenization that takes place under monopoly capitalism, a fact highlighted in the chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They pointed out a key characteristic of the times when they presented the insight that T.V., music, magazines and movies are monotonously same, presenting culture as uniform and sterile: "Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part" (120). Furthermore, these audio-visual devices of popular culture only look to be democratic, in fact they are non creative, turning spectators into passive recipients: "broadcast programs . . . are all exactly the same" (122). This is one of the causes of the weakening of cultural institutions, and Rich's socio-political and topical poetry strives against this phenomenon. Rich infuses greater relevance into culture by critiquing the contemporary and indicting the 'self' that thrives by usurping the place of the 'other'. Her works struggle against what Adorno and Horkheimer call as synchronizing of the society and classes of people with the "previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type" (123). Rich imparts to contemporary culture "meaningful reflection and creative imagination . . . engendering scope and potential for sustained thought" (127-28). The two left intellectuals point out that "a great work of art" wrestles with style, constantly probes for identity, striving to wring out meaning, but Mass culture encourages similarities and surrogate style turns purely imitative, which just upholds the prevailing hierarchy (131).

Raymond Williams in his chapter "Marxism and Culture" (*Culture and Society 1780-1950*) delineates that an account of culture must attempt to unravel the complex interconnections between the economic base and the superstructure comprising of politics, religion, art and philosophy. Marx stressed that the economic conditions are a foundation for our socio-political and intellectual life (Marx, quoted in Williams 272-74). This, on the one hand, explains Rich's preoccupation with the have-nots in her writings, and on the other hand it seems to raise a question concerning art and literature becoming an agency for social change. Rich seems to stand in consonance with thinkers of Cultural Studies like Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige and many others who realized the power of the working class, as an agency of resistance to the prevalent ideology. She like them sees culture as venue to spread

ideology and to resist it. Thus, deep understanding of Rich's works reveals them to be an ideological struggle with a aim to empower the powerless.

Rich's poetry of late fifties and sixties, and stresses upon the fact that Rich in her early years indulged in formalist poetry, but soon began trying to envision the political and rid herself of the influence of modernist masters: W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost. Example can be cited from her volumes: *A Change of World* (1951), *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955), *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954-1962* (1963), *Necessities of Life: Poems 1962-1965* (1966), *Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968* (1969) and *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970* (1971). Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, discuss the poems of the period in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* and point out her "rejection of the terms on which society says we must expend our existence and her departure on an inner journey of exploration and discovery" (289). It is truthfulness towards one's self alone that matters. She sought ways "in which the energy of creation and the energy of relation can be united" (Rich, "When We Dead Awaken." 43).

In her poetry of the seventies and eighties where, on the one hand, she is politically strident, frustrated with the situation of the world, while on the other she reprimands the imperialist masters, adopting a largely admonitory tone in the poetry of the period. This remains her key concern in her volumes : *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972* (1973), *Twenty-One Love Poems* (1976), *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (1978), *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981* (1981), *Sources* (1983), *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984* (1984), *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986), *Times Power: Poems 1985-1988* (1989), and *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*(1991). The works of this period reveal Rich as a mature poet. She mentions her concerns on the jacket cover of *Diving into the Wreck*:

. . . I've been trying to . . . break down the artificial barriers between private and public, between Vietnam and the lover's bed, between the deepest images we carry out of our dreams and the most daylight events 'out in the world'. This is the intention and longing behind everything I write.

She elaborates upon her aims and intentions in *An Atlas of the Difficult World*:

Catch if you can your country's moment, begin
 where any calendar's ripped-off: Appomattox
 Wounded Knee, Los Alamos, Selma, the last airlift from Saigon
 the ex-Army nurse hitch-hiking from the debriefing center;
 medal of spit on the veteran's shoulder
 --catch if you can this unbound land these states without a cause
 earth of despoiled graves and gazing these embittered brooks
 these pilgrim ants pouring out from the bronze eyes, ears, nostrils,
 the mouth of Liberty

over the chained bay waters

San Quentin:

once we lost our way and drove in under the searchlights to the gates end of
 visiting hours, women piling into cars
 the bleak glare aching over all

Where are we moored? What
 are the bindings? What be-
 hooves us? (12).

A debate was going on in the country, around this time, concerning the dwindling of the writing of great poetry in America. Notable contributors were Donald Hall, who wrote "Poetry and Ambition" (1982), Joseph Epstein who penned "Who Killed Poetry" (1988), and Dana Gioia who authored "Can Poetry Matter?" (1991). They felt that the cause of this was the turning of poetry into a profession and the distancing of the poet and his work from the common reader and his concerns. They also felt that increase in quantity of poetry has also lowered its quality. Also the quality has been lowered because of mushrooming of creative writing workshops in colleges and universities. Rich participated in this debate and discussed the larger political, economic, and social concerns, instead of only the institutional aspect. She envisioned poetry as a type of politico-social critique. Rich discussed the issue in detail in *What is Found There*. She said:

Poetry today matters little in the society because of poetry's 'cognitive and recollective powers, precisely because in this nation, created in search of wealth, it eludes capitalist marketing, commoditizing, prize-fixing, poetry has been set aside, depreciated, denied public space. Poetry itself, in our national life, is under house arrest, is officially 'disappeared'. Like our past, our collective memory, it remains an unfathomed, a devalued resource (84).

She opined that poetry that does not discern and probe into the comprehensiveness of life is poetry that holds little purpose or aspiration. In *Arts of the Possible* she said: “art has been encapsulated as a commodity, a salable artifact, something to be taught in MFA programs, that requires a special staff of ‘arts administrators’, something you ‘gotta have’ without knowing why” (57).

Rich’s poetry from the nineties include: *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991), *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems, 1991-1995* (1995), *Midnight Salvage: Poems, 1995-1998* (1999), *Fox: Poems 1998-2000* (2001), *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950-2001* (2002), *The School Among the Ruins: Poems, 2000-2004* (2004), *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004–2006* (2006), *Tonight No Poetry will Serve* (2010), and *Later Poetry: Selected and New, 1971-2012* (2013). This period also include prose volumes have like: *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993), *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (2001), *Poetry and Commitment: An Essay* (2007) and *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society, 1997-2008* (2009). In this period Rich was at the zenith of her creative powers and her work was diverse and variegated, encompassing a host of themes. She keenly strove to fulfil her aim of the enfranchisement of the deprived, employing sundry poetic skills and multiple technical strategies. In an interview she said: “One of the underlying themes of my poetry is that tension between the possibilities in language for mere containment and the possibilities for expansion, for liberation” (Gelpi 258). Emily Taylor Merriman discussed the poetic techniques employed by Rich in her verse and the values that shine forth from her expression. She says: “Ideally, there exists a productive partnership between poetic technique and the poet’s values; the technical features simultaneously enable the poet to express her values and serve as a concrete example of what she holds true” (Merriman 6). Rich understood the dual roles that language is made to do. It can act as “a potentially liberating force” that “lives at the heart of Adrienne Rich’s poetic endeavour,” but simultaneously the poet was conscious that “language can also be used as an instrument of oppression” (6). This “tension” or “struggle between containment and liberation” can be seen in the “variety of verse forms . . . engaged in dialogue with traditional forms” (06-07). Rich expressed her inclinations and desires in *What is Found There: Notebook and Poetry and Politics* (1993): “I was exceptionally well grounded in formal technique, and I loved the craft. What I was groping for was something larger, a sense of vocation, what it means to live as a poet—not how to write poetry, but wherefore” (195-196). Rich constantly strove to render her verse evocative, creative and dynamic. Her views on the issue are available in her essay “Format and Form,” where a passage is worth quoting in detail:

Poetic forms—meters, rhyming patterns, the shaping of poems into symmetrical blocks of lines called couplets or stanzas—have existed since poetry was an oral activity. Such forms can easily become format, of course, where the dynamics of experience and desire are forced to fit a pattern to which they have no organic relationship. People are often taught in school to confuse closed poetic forms (or formulas) with poetry itself, the lifeblood of the poem. Or, that a poem consists merely in a series of sentences broken (formatted) into short lines called ‘free verse’. But a closed form like the sestina, the sonnet, the villanelle remains inert formula or format unless the ‘triggering subject’, as Richard Hugo called it, acts on the imagination to make the form evolve, become responsive, or works almost in resistance to the form. It’s a struggle not to let the form take over, lapse into format, assimilate the poetry; and that very struggle can produce a movement, a music, of its own (218-219).

It is mature Rich who envisions change as the matrix, where outrage has to be confronted to be a complete multi-aspectual human being, and where connection to history of multiple outrages is intimate. Present, in a sense, is a continuum of the past, where the past always impinges upon the present, and Rich’s candour of expression shines in this regard. She says:

That light of outrage is the light of history
springing upon us when we’re least prepared,
thinking maybe a little glade of time
leaf-thick and with clear water
is ours, is promised us, for all we’ve hacked
and tracked our way through: to this:
What will it be? Your wish or mine? your
prayers or my wish then: that those we love
be well, whatever that means, to be well.
Outrage: who dare claim protection for their own
amid such unprotection? What kind of prayer
is that? To what kind of god? What kind of wish? (“Through Corralitos” 49).

Such concerns persist in the subsequent volume as well. Rich interrogates “What Kinds of Times are These,” delving into the domains of politics, civil unrest and violence:

I’ve walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, but
don’t be fooled,
this isn’t a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here,
our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,
its own ways of making people disappear (*Dark Fields* 3).

The poet is unforgiving of all nations, and least of her mother country.

The polyphonic and contrapuntal characteristics of Rich's poetry is of real relevance. Her works prove that Rich is one of the most complex American poets of the times, who eschews sloganeering and the overtly polemical and instead attempts a blend of praxis and participation, rather than apartheid, coercion and isolation. She herself discussed the concept of "maturity in poetry, as in ordinary life," in her introduction to *Best American Poetry 1996*:

Maturity in poetry, as in ordinary life, surely means taking our places in history, in accountability, in a web of responsibilities met or failed, of received and changing forms, arguments with community or tradition, a long dialogue between art and justice (*Arts of the Possible* 114).

It is in the same place that her qualities of mutual coexistence among nations and people, and the phenomenon of contrapuntal are clearly visible. She said:

To hold up the mirror of language to a society in fracture, porous with lying and shrill with contempt for meaning, is not the same thing as creating—if only in the poem itself—another kind of space where other human and verbal relationships are possible (113).

Her poetry provides a vision of an emergent and emancipated way of living in the world, as well as relating to others. Her directness and strength yield interpersonal spaces in her work, which are not controlled ideologically. These are the characteristics that provide a sense of power and potency to her work and simultaneously empower the reader. Rich in her poetry incessantly chiseled out a space of great intimacy that can be readily instanced from poems like "The Phenomenology of Anger," where she passionately protested against U.S. usurpation of the space of Vietnam:

I suddenly see the world
as no longer viable:
you are out there burning the crops
with some new sublimata
This morning you left the bed
we still share
and went out to spread impotence
upon the world
I hate you.
I hate the mask you wear, your eyes
assuming a depth
they do not possess, drawing me
into the grotto of your skull
the landscape of bone
I hate your words
they make me think of fake
revolutionary bills
crisp imitation parchment
they sell at battlefields (*Diving into the Wreck* 29).

The poem 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. She also presents the image of a poet at work, part self-image, which is stark and intensely truthful:

Try sitting at a typewriter
one calm summer evening
at a table by a window
in the country, try pretending
your time does not exist
that you are simply you
that the imagination simply strays
like a great moth, unintentional
try telling yourself
you are not accountable
to the life of your tribe
to the breath of your planet ("North American Time" 34).

4. CONCLUSION:

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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