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## Adrienne C. Rich: A Poet of Varied Hues

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### Abstract

Adrienne C. Rich is a modern American writer, whose poetry and prose from the earliest (early sixties) to the present, has been whole heartedly a deliberation on contemporary issues and a redefining of aesthetic ideals. She surfaces through her extraordinary poetry as a “pioneer” in poetry of empowerment (Gelpi xi). But, critics consistently in the last more than four decades have made formulaic theses discussing feminism in Rich’s poetry. They continue hammering their single track thematic of feminism. But, this is half the truth. They fail to study how she seeks through her writings empowerment for the marginalized, the downtrodden people existing on the fringes. Be that women in one case, isolated and ostracized communities and clans in another case. If we look at her simply as a feminist we are reading only half the message in her essays and poems. Composing of poetry goes beyond a process of self-discovery and self-definition. In fact a large part of her poetry is both a deliberation on contemporary issues and a redefining of aesthetic ideals.

**Keywords:** Marginalized, Self-Definition, Amalgamation, Oeuvre, Feminism, Hues

Stuart Hall endeavoring to define the nature of our culture and its intricate relation with the society, stresses upon the complexity of change, multiple ways of social communication, and above all the intellectual in the public sphere trying to come to grips with this phenomenon. He says:

...questions about culture...[are] concerned with the *changing ways of life* of societies and groups and the networks of meanings that individuals and groups use to make sense of and to communicate with one another: what Raymond Williams once called *whole ways of communicating*, which are always *whole ways of life*; the dirty crossroads where *popular culture* intersects with the high arts; that place where *power* cuts across *knowledge*, or where culture processes anticipate *social change* (Hall 337).

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Adrienne C. Rich in her poetry and prose, from the earliest (early sixties) to the present times, has been wholeheartedly concerned with these “*whole ways of life*,” and the “crossroads,” where undifferentiated notions are subject to scrutiny, commonly held assumptions are investigated and our prevalent culture is subjected to rigorous analysis. In one of her essays of the seventies Rich has a close look at one of the iconic intellectual associations of America, and records her impressions candidly. She says:

The Modern Language Association is both marketplace and funeral parlour for the professional study of Western literature in North America. Like all gatherings of the professions, it has been and remains a “procession of the sons of educated men” ...: a congeries of old-boys’ networks, academicians rehearsing their numb canons in sessions dedicated to the literature of white males, junior scholars under the lash of ‘publish or perish’, delivering papers in the bizarrely lit drawing-rooms of immense hotels: ritual competition veering between cynicism and desperation (Rich “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” 166).

She wants such ‘bizarre’ assemblies to be supplanted by “some ... scholars, teachers, and graduate students, joined by... writers, editors, and publishers ... [to create] ... more subversive occasions, challenging the sacredness of the gentlemanly canon, sharing the rediscovery of buried works ..., asking ... questions, bringing literary history and criticism back to life ...” (166). Rich goes on to elaborate on her desire: she wants “the dynamic between a political vision and the demand for a fresh vision of literature,” to empower the disempowered in the society. Rich desires that some progress in the direction of egalitarianism has to come about. She says:

Much, much more is yet to be done; and university curricula have of course changed very little .... What *is* changing is the availability of knowledge, of vital texts, the visible effects... of seeing, hearing... wordless or negated experience affirmed and pursued further in language (166-67).

In the same essay, Rich goes on to discuss Henrik Ibsen’s play *When We Dead Awaken*, and quotes G.B. Shaw’s much acclaimed study on the plays of Ibsen. Rich approvingly quotes the following from Shaw: “... what remains to be seen as perhaps the most interesting of all imminent social developments is what will happen ‘when we dead awaken’” (Shaw *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* 139).

Obviously falling in love with Ibsen’s work and Shaw’s acclaimed commentary upon it, Rich expresses herself, rather generously:

It’s exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting, and painful. This awakening of dead or sleeping consciousness has already affected the lives of millions... even those who don’t know it yet.... The sleepwalkers are coming awake, and for the first time

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this awakening has a collective reality; it is no longer such a lonely thing to open one's eyes (Rich "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" 167). Rich's critique of the times we live in is in consonance with Ien Ang's vision for our age that has to be our common endeavour. Ang says that our aim and ambition concerning critiquing prevalent practices in our society should be:

... positively and self-consciously eclectic, critical and deconstructive. ... Ultimately, ... [it] does not mean contributing to the accumulation of science for science's sake, the building of an ever more encompassing, solidly constructed empirically validated stock of 'received knowledge', but participating in an ongoing, open-ended, politically-oriented debate, aimed at evaluating and producing critique on our contemporary cultural condition. In this context, topicality, critical sensibility and sensitivity for the concrete are more important than theoretical professionalism and methodological purity (Ang "Culture and Communication" 238).

Rich's enterprise is similar in the sense that she writes with such a purpose. She herself defines her "Writing as Re-Vision," with a view to smoothen class conflicts, gender relations, societal monstrosities and social maladies. It's only in this manner, according to Rich that there will be even distribution of power and knowledge, and for this, past as much as present need to be reappraised. Rich says:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entertaining an old text from a new critical direction – is ... more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge ... is more than a search for identity ... A radical critique of literature ... would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, ... and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live –afresh.... We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us (Rich "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" 167-68).

Rich is conscious of the colossal work of re-reading and re-critiquing the literature and culture of today and yesterday. She takes up the challenge and articulates the inherent dangers:

For writers, and at this moment ... there is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored. But there is also a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice, as we try to find language and images for a

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consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us (168).

Thus, Rich is deeply concerned for the other, and duly articulates her anxiousness to strive to alleviate their lot. She aims to empower them.

Concerning her vocation of letters, Rich says: “for a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive” (173-74). She is intelligent enough to envisage that “the energy of creation and the energy of relation” have to be “united” (174). Rich’s range of issues is diverse, broad and comprehensive. She voices her concern over a range of contemporary problems. She says that she “needed to think for myself -- about pacifism and dissent and violence, about poetry and society, and about my own relationship to all these things” (174). Thus, Rich is “sworn to lucidity” (Rich “I Dream I’m the Death of Orpheus” 19), concerning which John Ashbery says that Rich’s poetry is not “fence-sitting/raised to the level of an aesthetic ideal” (Ashbery *The Double Dream of Spring* 18). According to Rich herself, poetry fails to achieve its effect when it loses touch with the ground realities which are important sources of energy for not only poetry, but all literature. Rich has been dissatisfied with much of poetry that is available in our times, because it is full of prognostications of the doomsday being near, and they make you feel that we are in the position of a Dr. Faustus with his last half hour on earth. Rich expatriates on the phenomenon:

I have thought that the sense of the doom and resignation to loneliness endemic in much ... poetry has to do with a sense *hvis clos*, of having come to an end of a certain kind of perception (Rich “Poetry, Personality, and Wholeness” 78).

Gradually, Rich in her poetry voyaged beyond the processes of self-discovery and self-definition. She came to envision both: “the *visio beatifica*” and the “truth... moist and green of ground reality.” Furthermore, this truth will come through “these words, these whispers, and conversations.” She profusely poeticizes:

If from time to time I envy  
the pure annunciations to the eye  
the *visio beatifica*  
if from time to time I long to turn  
like the Eleusinian hierophant  
holding up a simple ear of grain  
for return to the concrete and everlasting world  
what in fact I keep choosing  
are these words, these whispers, conversations  
from which time after time the truth breaks moist and green  
(Rich *The Dream of a Common Language*20).

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In this very volume of poems, entitled *The Dream of a Common Language*, there is perceptible change both in style and subject matter. From self-conscious formalist poetry, Rich graduates to subtlety of expression, and the generality of concerns. She writes:

What kind of beast would turn its life into words?  
What atonement is this all about?  
-- and yet, writing words like these, I'm also living.  
.....  
And how have I used rivers, how have I used wars to  
escape writing of the worst thing of all—  
not the crimes of others, not even our own death,  
but the failure to want our freedom passionately enough  
so that blighted elms, sick rivers, massacres would seem  
mere emblems of that desecration of ourselves (28).

Such poems repose on the amalgamation of two factors. There is an internal aspect that exhibits Rich's ability to discipline experience through intelligence and there is an external aspect that reveals the quality and intensity of that experience as she delineates the process of selecting facets and aspects. Thus, assertions are to be suitably qualified; the relating of the internal and the external aspects has to be the aim and ambition of the poet and the expectation of the reader. It is to the credit of Rich that she is aware of it, and expresses it intensely as evidenced by one of the key poems in the volume, *The Dream of a Common Language*, entitled, "Transcendental Etude:"

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,  
make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history  
or music, that we should begin  
with the simple exercises first  
and slowly go on trying  
the hard ones, practicing till strength  
and accuracy became one with the daring  
to leap into transcendence, take the chance  
of breaking down in the wild arpeggio  
or faulting the full sentences of the fugue... (Rich "Transcendental Etude" 72-77).

In "Transcendental Etude," which is one of Rich's assertive poems, she handles the internal factors of mind and intelligence very well. In the language of the poem there is the successful synthesis of the metaphoric and the metonymic. Commenting on the political, it must be kept in mind that assertions are as efficacious as is their capacity to engage the problems needing assertions, and they cannot be validated only by their relation to the past. It is to the credit of

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Rich that she refuses to be satisfied by such assertions. For her they are at the most points of departure for embarkations on newer voyages or to create fresh avenues for imaginative inquiry. Perhaps, her best work is the phenomenon of dialectical self-reflection that she undertakes in her volume *A Wild Patience*, where she attempts to comprehend as to what exactly her assertions commit her to and also the intellectual and emotional price that Rich must pay for remaining faithful to such assertions. Her meditations finally make her subordinate aesthetic questions to everyday human concerns and the ways in which her poems might reveal a road and a life to the community.

Rich has also mastered expressions of other aspects of life as, for instance, in “Transcendental Etude” the genesis of the poem lies in dreamy, nostalgic memories, when she reminisces over poetic deer hunting. Sheer expression unleashes energies that over-step the meditating mind. A voice arises and commits private memory to public context:

This August evening I’ve been driving  
over backroads fringed with queen anne’s lace  
my car startling young deer in meadows -- one  
gave a hoarse intake of her breath and all  
four fawns sprang after her  
into the dark maples (Rich, “Transcendental Etude” 72).

The poem reveals Rich to be a keen observer of life in its diversities, presenting an intricate blend of transience, mortality, and the beauties of the momentary, vanishing present. Rich observes succinctly:

The deer are...  
nibbling apples from early-laden boughs  
so weighted, so englobed  
with already yellowing fruit  
they seem eternal, Hesperidean  
in the clear-tuned, cricket-throbbing air (Rich, “Transcendental Etude” 73).

She persists with the age old theme of “fragility” of life that has been the subject matter of poetry and literature from times immemorial:

Later I stood in the dooryard,  
my nerves singing the immense  
fragility of all this sweetness,  
this green world already sentimentalized, photographed,  
advertised to death. Yet, it persists  
stubbornly beyond the fake Vermont  
of antique barnboards glazed into discotheques,  
artificial snow, the sick Vermont of children  
conceived in apathy, grown to winters

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of rotgut violence,  
poverty gnashing its teeth like a blind cat at their lives (Rich, "Transcendental Etude" 73).

Such poems lament the loss of life going the way of mortality, but they also celebrate life and its beauties. This celebration continues:

... a green so dense with life,  
minute, momentary life-- slugs, moles, pheasants, gnats,  
spiders, moths, hummingbirds, groundhogs, butterflies –  
a lifetime is too narrow  
to understand it all, beginning with the huge  
rockshelves that underlie all that life (Rich, "Transcendental Etude" 73).

While we observe this diversity of themes and subject matters in Rich's oeuvre, it is obvious that critics have missed the comprehensiveness in the poet's work and they have done little justice to her stature as a complex observer and commentator of life and manners. Undoubtedly Rich has dwelt upon the plight of the other and devoted space to the issues related to women, but she has deplored violence and poverty in the other areas of community life. Occasionally, critics comment on this phenomenon in passing, in a line or two, and then continue hammering their single track thematic of feminism. Claire Keyes, an ardent feminist, who searches for the feminist perspectives in Rich's work with a flashlight, is compelled to say: "Reading the early poems of Adrienne Rich and looking for the feminist visionary of her later poems can be an acute disappointment" (Keyes15).

While reading Rich's poems like the much acclaimed "Transcendental Etude" (1978), it becomes quite obvious that there is a close-knit concatenation of themes and concerns in her poetry. The "pattern in the carpet" of Rich's *oeuvre* is the relation between the cultural and the natural, and the two form the warp and woof of the poetic fabric. It is their symbiotic integration that provides authenticity to her poetry. Rich is successful in efficiently managing to combine political rhetoric with both personal and public communitarian concerns. It goes to her credit to say that such combining and concatenation is difficult to bring about, and then maintain. She has to withstand sundry temptations. Rich had to withstand the temptation to grandiloquent self-projection, and also to curb the triumph of the solitary will over chaos as she found, for instance, in Yeats who was her favorite poet, and also, furthermore, not to be tempted to value the self in terms of pathos, while discussing the plight of the other and too closely identifying with the object of her analysis, lest the poetic aesthetic is marred. The more she resists these temptations, and the more the reader recognizes this resistance that sensitive reader's suspicions are reduced and Rich's poems succeed in presenting themselves as instances of the poetic aesthetic, in addition to offering credible solutions to issues and concerns of the day. Thus, the basic problems in Rich's political poetry are overcome, and she succeeds in maintaining a stance that is both ideal and realistic. Resolution through the

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ideal is defended and the authenticity of the specific and the concrete is maintained with aplomb. A little more of the political will transform her poems into bitterness and invective, in the nature of sloganeering, and a little less of it will mute the concerns that she wishes to articulate. From *Diving Into the Wreck*, we can instance Rich's "When We Dead Awaken," where the poet again takes recourse to metaphors, allowing metaphoricity to achieve its effect:

--tell it over and over, the words  
get thick with unmeaning--  
yet never have we been closer to the truth  
of the lies we were living, listen to me:  
the faithfulness I can imagine would be a weed  
flowering in tar, a blue energy piercing  
the massed atoms of a bedrock disbelief  
(Rich "When We Dead Awaken" 96).

Nevertheless, dissenting voices have been heard. Critics disgrace concerning the efficacy success of Rich's poems. Marjorie G. Perloff, for instance, criticizes Rich for "claiming a radical politics within a thoroughly established style that co-opts the assertion." She says:

The irony is that when Rich becomes relatively experimental in style, she cannot carry off her vision. Since the core of her politics is a quite traditional notion of self and will, she must use a straightforward style. That becomes radical in itself when, as Gerald Graff argues in *Literature Against Itself* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, pp. 98-101), experiment has become standard. Rich, in other words, is sustenance for claims of Lukacs and Marcuse against Brecht (Perloff "The Corn-Porn Lyric" 87).

Rich is a deeply self-conscious poet, and she brings much this sensitivity to her compositions, and goes on incessantly scrutinizing her tools for their efficacy and effect. This is obvious when we instance it from Rich's "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children." She says:

I am composing on the typewriter late at night, thinking of today. How well we all spoke. A language is a map of our failures. Frederick Douglass wrote an English purer than Milton's. People suffer highly in poverty. There are methods but we do not use them. Joan, who could not read, spoke some pleasant form of French. Some of the sufferings are: it is hard to tell the truth; this is America; I cannot touch you now. In America we have only the present tense. I am in danger. You are in danger. The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me. I know it hurts to burn. There are flames of napalm in Catonsville, Maryland. I know it hurts to

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burn. The typewriter is overheated, my mouth is burning, I cannot touch you and this is the oppressor's language (Rich "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" 42-43).

In Rich's poetry vision and disposition towards action are interlinked, as we find, for instance, in her poem "The Stranger." It must be an endeavor of the perceptive reader to attempt to reveal and analyses this complexity, eschewing univocity, to show the strength of her poetry. This is Rich's way of empowering the disempowered. The point is brought home by the second stanza of the poem:

If I come into a room out of the sharp misty light  
and hear them talking a dead language  
if they ask me my identity  
what can I say but  
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 a new born child (Rich "The Stranger" 52-53).

Rich's figure of the "androgyne" is her mythic metaphor for empowerment, replenishment and regeneration. It is the marriage of myth and reality. The present study thus attempts to unravel such complexities in Rich's poetry, in order to have a fuller understanding of her range, breadth and diversity.

In conclusion, it would be appropriate to share some of the controversies surrounding Rich's work. A part comment, which is quite pertinent is available in Charles Altieri's essay "The Idea and Ideal of a Canon" (*Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983) 37-60):

Several of the best women critics of contemporary poetry seem embarrassed by the ideological narrowness of Rich's recent work and attack the poetry for what I shall try to show are themselves narrowly aesthetic standards. See Helen Vendler, "All Too Real," *New York Review of Books* (Dec.16, 1981), pp. 32-51 and, for different, radically modernist aesthetic values, Marjorie Perloff, "Private Lives/Public Images," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 22 (Winter 1983), pp. 130-42. They are in part justified by the largely uncritical adulation that Rich gets from feminist critics. See, for example, the essays by Wendy Martin, Erica Jong, and Nancy Milford in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton, 1975). Even the best reading of Rich, David Kalstone's *Five Temperaments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), cannot satisfactorily bridge the

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competing frameworks for viewing her work. By concentrating on temperament he gets beyond aesthetic criteria, but he does not provide the contrastive framework that I think necessary for judging her significance to contemporary poetry (Altieri 37-38).

Suffice it to say that on the one hand these comments and assertions cannot be ignored, and on the other hand, commitment to certain ideas is a salient feature of Rich's poems. It is a more basic factor in such anthologies as, for instance, in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*. Another way of looking at Rich's ideas is that instead of ignoring them, we should closely focus on the crucial features of that consciousness and Rich's grasp and understanding of present day experiences. Such a perspective will take us closer to understanding Rich's ideas and expectations and save us from getting tied down to an ideology, whether it is the poet's or the reader's ideology. Furthermore, Rich's ideas are not abstract generalizations about the world, since they arise from the ground realities of coercion and ostracism. So Rich's aim is primarily ethical. It is through her ideas that she responds to a socio-political order, where these ideas are the dialectical features. They signify steps taken towards self-understanding and perspectivising of experience. Such a stance and ideas have to be measured by the model of a community she hopes to bring into existence. Rich's poetic journey has been from a creator of well-made lyrics to a persona with views that have been termed as radical. Summarily speaking, three strands stand out in Rich's poetry:

1. The purposes and processes of first defining and then evaluating personal identity;
2. The poet's potential in rendering private states of mind serving public political purposes; and
3. Rich's detailed discursive style that dynamically links the poet's processes of self-consciousness to a community, as existing really and as envisioned ideally.

And after studying these strands in a detail, one cannot deny reappraising Rich's poetry and conclusively revealing that Rich is a comprehensive poet of varied hues and concerns.

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