

The Exigency of Androgyny in the Personal and the Political in “Diving into the Wreck” of Adrienne Rich

Dr. B. Soundary

Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier’s College (Autonomous),
Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract : Rich’s poetry is dazzling and innovative in its own right – but she made her poetry political and personal and the stories she told were the stories of a changing generation on the cusp of freedom. Gifted and brave, Rich wrote poetry that went beyond the arts, it helped change the world for the better. (Marisa Bate) Identified as one of the leading American poets, Rich soared to fame with the publication of her second major volume of poetry titled “Diving into the Wreck” in 1973 which also won her the National Book Award in 1974. In the poem, Rich portrays a diver who gets equipped with the sea-diving tools and immerses into the deep sea to explore the remnants of an old ship at the bottom of the sea. The diver’s journey is both physical and psychological as it attempts to explicate the unexplored realms of the old schooner and the inexplicable psyche of the diver as well. Though the poet wants women’s voices to be heard in ‘the man’s world’, she emphasizes on the need for the human liberation from the confined gender roles and fixed identities through the portrayal of the androgynous diver in the poem. While exploring the personal and political realms of life, Rich addresses the entire civilization which must be freed from the inequitable beliefs regarding gender.

Keywords: Inexplicable psyche, Androgynous, Human liberation, Gender identities, Gender equity

Introduction

“Adrienne Rich’s poetry changes lives, its own and ours” (P. 1), says Craig Hansen Werner in his book *Adrienne Rich: The Poet and Her Critics*. The uniqueness of Rich’s poetry lie in the aspect that they reach beyond the artistic limitation and include every possible gender, categorized on earth so far, and strive earnestly for their deserving rights which shall transform the world as a better place for everyone. This kind of writing is an outcome of the combination of her poetic gift and her courageous outlook of the patriarchal set up in the society. After realizing the manifestation of a strong, feminist voice inside her, as early as in the 1960s, Rich was able to channelize that energy by engaging herself intensively at the various movements like the Feminist, the Civil Rights, and the Anti-Vietnam War that were emerging large at the societal level at that time.

Thematically, there is no major area of concern that Rich has not touched upon or delved into; be it gender discrimination, class divisions, sexuality crisis, violence, poverty, or in other words, marginalization or subjugation of any kind inflicted on human beings. Not stopping with that, she has emphasized, through her poetry, the need to have an unwavering commitment of every individual to the society at large. Marilyn R. Farwell, professor at the University of Oregon, in her article “Adrienne Rich and an Organic Feminist Criticism” observes the style and theme of Rich’s writings as, “The qualification of the male principle by the female principle establishes the wholeness which is at the heart of Rich’s ethics, and she defines that interrelationship as community.” (P. 194) With that, Rich has not restricted her identity as a poet of the United States of America alone, but of the world communities where simple, common lives are being threatened in the name of divisions, poverty, and violence.

As a poet with an acute interest and understanding of both the social and the political movements, Rich is able to voice out not only the Feminist perspective, nor the Gender perspective, but also the partial aspects of the Patriarchy that ultimately makes her poetry as the convergence of diverse realities of life. The convergence of personal and political becomes the expertise of her writings which stimulate and challenge the existing, the one-sided dialogue commonly found everywhere. Referred by Jeannette E. Riley as “a groundbreaking poet” (Preface), in *Understanding Adrienne Rich*, the poet has a deeper understanding of the utility of poetry in the human lives. With that awareness, her poetry addresses primarily the subjugated sections of the society, at the same time not excluding the so-called predominant sections too.

Materials and Methods

Poetry that liberates the fugitives from the hostile surroundings seems to be the objective of her writings where she has also aimed at inventing a common language for all who have been experiencing trauma of different kinds. Adrienne Rich approaches the human liberation from various stereotypes present in the contemporary society, by analyzing three types of themes, which are chiefly found in her writings. They are the criticism of patriarchy, the need to have women-centered premises, and the benefits of combining personal and political experiences. As per her awareness on patriarchy, Rich understands the need to come out of one’s own preoccupied feelings to understand others’ feelings. Eventually, this need insists on her second theme regarding the female space which ultimately leads toward the third theme of combining personal and political. Craig Werner rightly remarks, “Her attempt to unify the multiple levels of experience—personal and political; academic and popular; aesthetic and intellectual—dictates her continuing emphasis on process.” (P. 13) Through these thematic concerns, Rich advocates the benefits of process which must be aimed at by all the individuals.

Widely considered as one of Rich’s transitional works, *Diving into the Wreck* was first published in the year 1973, and won the National Book Award the very next

year of its publication. While receiving the prize, Rich, along with the other two women writers nominated for the Award, AudreLorde and Alice Walker, received it collectively; this shows her real concern of oneness. Having the Women's Movement of the 1970s at the backdrop, this poem portrays an androgynous diver who immerses into the sea to explore the remnants of an old ship. The task of diving into the sea, and the physical and the psychological discomforts that are being experienced by the diver are illustrated by the writer in her own unique way of expression. The New Anthology of American Poetry: Postmodernisms 1950-Present delineates as, "...the poem's undersea exploration might be a journey into mythical and psychological-as well as-literal depths." (P. 247) Accordingly, the poem appears to highlight two themes namely the Androgynous identities and searching for truth in human lives. The poet who believes in 'process' and wants equivalence in the society, emphasizes on the need for liberating mankind from their rigid attitude and approach regarding gender roles.

Results and Discussion

This paper titled "The Exigency of Androgyny in the Personal and the Political in "Diving into the Wreck" of Adrienne Rich" attempts to trace the poet's belief that by freeing ourselves from the gender restrictions, more can be achieved and people shall be liberated from various confinements. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the term 'Androgynous' as "having a partly male, partly female appearance; looking neither strongly male nor strongly female" (P. 40). The meaning of 'Androgyny', the noun equivalent of the term 'Androgynous', refers to the blended biological sex features in human beings. Additionally, it shall also refer to gender identity and gender expression where the mixed characteristics are not visible biologically. Androgynous individuals shall also be referred as "gender-neutrals" (Androgyny, Wikipedia). Gender expression is constructed by the society which shall be expressed in terms of dressings, mannerisms, communications and the overall conduct of the androgynous individuals. Not all countries celebrate such expressions; instead, they try to suppress or to control them as they think stereotypically that those expressions are against the law of nature. But few countries embrace the androgynous expressions, though not unanimously by all the inmates of those countries, as natural evolution and in such countries, and there too, only in certain places gender roles are not strictly followed or identified with.

Rich has made the speaker of the poem androgynous who prepares to go down in search of an old, wrecked ship. The diver's dress itself reminds the difficulty of identifying the gender of the diver. The wrecked ship that the speaker is going to search is a symbolic representation of the desolate inner lives of women which are not properly examined so far. It shall also be a representation of the entire civilization which has ignored the liberty of gender roles and thereby, follow a conventional attitude towards gender. Besides, the uncomfortable diving dress, she also carries a camera and a knife with her. In the poem, she says,

“I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.” (P. 22)

By referring to the French explorer Jacques Cousteau, she underscores the lonely plight of women, whereas men receive lot of assistance in their everyday lives. Claire Colebrook, in her book *Gender*, presents the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir’s view as, “For Beauvoir, one can only begin to think about women’s rights and the political situation of women, once one has addressed the ideals of the subject in opposition to Otherness.” (P.3) Claire points out Beauvoir’s concept of addressing women’s issues requires addressing the male space. She also accentuates how the ‘self’ is identified with the male and the ‘other’ with the female. Eventually, the male represents the active humanity, whereas the female remains with the fixed identities thrust upon them.

The poet draws the attention to a ladder that has been hanging by the side of the ship. She says that the ladder is a familiar tool to women as it is compared to the separate entrance, built in most of the traditional houses in the past, that were meant for women alone. In the “Wreck” she comments, “We know what it is for, /we who have used it.” (P. 22) In those ancestral houses, women were not given free access to all the premises. Most often, the front portion of the house was frequented and occupied by the men; whereas women were expected and instructed, stereotypically though, to use the other entrance that led them to their ‘private backyard’ where they could do what they wanted to do, however, not beyond the wall. So the ladder image in the poem helps in bringing out the neglected women’s lives, which were never brought to the limelight before.

“Diving into the Wreck” compares the inner lives of women to a diving experience where they are expected to wear the distressing diver’s attire that slow them down, “cripple” (P.22) them in Rich’s words, and also the lonely search down the history without getting any help or acknowledgement. Through this poem Adrienne Rich attempts to represent the American scenario of the 1970s where women’s voices were conveniently let out of the common dialogue and everything related to men was important and truthful. The first and the last stanzas of the poem refer to a book of myth which typically represents the lives of women as the book does not consist of truth, so as the women’s identities. The book of myth may even represent the history where the names of the women were not recorded, indicating the partial discourse of the American scene.

Conclusion

Hence, the poem may sound more of a feminist ideology, yet the androgynous diver implies that it is a plea for all to liberate themselves from the gender inequity.

Soundary's comment in the article "Reconciliation through Humour in Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*" illustrates, "When an individual's bitter past is revisited, analysed critically, and combined with that of the opponent, it becomes a collective memory. When such a combination is attempted, a new dialogue emerges..." (P. 61) When Rich says, in a reconciliatory tone, "I am she: I am he" (P. 24), she has not only represented the long suppressed memories of all the women of the past and the present, the difficulties in their everyday lives with crushed identities, but also expresses her expectation from the society of overcoming gender restrictions to achieve more in the personal as well as in the political lives. Thus, the androgynous speaker is the key portrayal of Adrienne Rich for showing the world that the full human potentiality can be tapped if all genders are treated one and the same.

References

1. Bate, Marisa. *The Periodic Table of Feminism*. London: Pop Press. 2018. Print.
2. Werner, Craig Hansen. *Adrienne Rich: The Poet and Her Critics*. United States of America: American Library association. 1988. Print.
3. Rich, Adrienne. *Diving into the Wreck*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 1973. Print.
4. Riley, Jeannette E. *Understanding Adrienne Rich*. Columbia: University of South Carolina. 2016. Print.
5. Hornby, A. S. (ed.) *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2nd Ed.)* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963. Print.
6. Colebrook, Claire. *Gender*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2004. Print.
7. Farwell, Marilyn R. "Adrienne Rich and an Organic Feminist Criticism". *College English* 39.2 (1977): 191-203. National Council of Teachers of English. Web. Oct. 1977.
8. Axelrod, Steven Gould, Camille Roman, Thomas Travisano. Eds. *The New Anthology of American Poetry: Postmodernisms 1950-Present*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. 2012. Print.
9. Soundary, B. "Reconciliation through Humour in Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*". *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies* Vol. 7(3): 59-63. 2020.