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**WOMEN'S CHANGING ROLE TO FACE MALES' DOMINANCE IN  
ADRIENNE RICH'S POETRY**

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**Abstract**

*This paper aims at shedding light on the way Adrienne Rich, the prominent American poet in both the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, used her poetry to clarify the changes that occurred throughout her life as a woman. These changes coincided with the shifts which happened in the life of women all over the world at that time, and that reflected females' quest for affirming their identity in their masculine-dominated societies. Rich embraced the ideas related to lesbianism and feminism and made herself an ardent activist in these two movements. This was a way of resisting the dominance of males in life. She also called for all women's solidarity in the face of the oppression inflicted on them by men. Rich used her poetry in a confessional way to express all these ideas and defend her determination to live as a lesbian through her life.*

**Keywords:** Adrienne Rich, lesbianism, feminism, identity affirmation, activist, masculine, confessional poetry, double-sidedness, dominance, society, role, males, females, androgyny and women's suffering.

*I write out my life  
hour by hour, word by word*

(Adrienne Rich (1929-2012), *COLLECTED POEMS [CP]*, p. 355)

When investigating the portrayal of the landscape of women's life during the twentieth century in America, it becomes quite clear that the female identity has gone through limitless change. This change came as part of the total cultural shift from the time of modernism to that of post-modernism. According to the critical concepts of modernism, the female identity was to be reflected merely in the form-related aspects of literary texts. The ideas expressed throughout such texts which were supposedly extracted from life in the world of reality were not taken into consideration as regards the pursuit of the female identity. However, in literary texts which came to light during the postmodernist period witnessed a concrete change in handling this issue. The paper aims to present a thematic discussion of Adrienne Rich's poetry focusing on her quest to affirm her femininity as well as the development of this idea.

Several female writers have attempted to pursue their identity as women earnestly and closely through their works. This must have posed the launching of the movement of feminism. Riley et. al. point out that "Feminist thought, as a philosophical paradigm, is ... concerned ... with the granting of equal rights to women or highlighting the oppression of women." (p.93) Therefore, some American women poets in the postmodernist time tended to brood over the discussion of their feminism by reflecting on ideas as well as incidents taken from their own lives.

Up to the era of World War 2, women in American society had to live within the restrictions of their double-sided role. They had to accept the social roles imposed on them and to be wives or mothers. A woman's realm was her house. She had to accept being second to her husband or just an assistant to him. This paper aims at shedding light on Adrienne Rich's attempt to address women's suffering and pain throughout the element of lyricism in her poetry. The noted poet comments:

I was a woman terribly vulnerable, critical using femaleness as a sort of standard of yardstick to measure and discard men. Yes--something like that. I was an Anna who invited defeat from men without ever being conscious of it.(pp. 631, 632, *Signs*)

Motherhood, moreover, was the other most important side of the social task of women. A female was responsible for bringing up her children and preparing them to be active and good citizens in their society.

What may add value to the ideas tackled here is that Rich is a renowned modern American poet. Her poetry won her numerous awards. Some of these were: National Book Award (1974), Wallace Stevens Award (1997), National Medal of the Arts (1997), and National Book Critics Circle Award (2005). (Stein, pp. 180,181) Ciocio-Pop clarifies that Rich believed in the dilemma of women whose "choice of [other] women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers" had to be treated as something shameful and there was no chance to discuss it openly. (p. 52) The prominent poet died in 2012 at the age of 82 bequeathing a prolific production of poetry in which she exerted all effort to bring to light women's concerns, problems and needs though in a way which caused her the repulsion of a lot of people.

When attempting to analyze the significant theme handled by Adrienne Rich through her poetry, it becomes quite obvious that this analysis cannot be carried out without doing this in the light of the history of the American society during the poet's lifetime. The two sides are definitely inseparable. The writer herself wrote:

my life out there  
in turbid America—  
my own life, lived against  
facts I keep there. (*CP*, p. 246)

One of the most important junctures in the poet's journey dates back to The Second World War. During the global struggle, the American society was in bad need of work hands. Most young men were recruited as soldiers to defend the nation. Hence, there was a lack of workers to fill in the gaps left in factories especially in the military field. Women stepped forward to fill in the gaps. In this way, women were socially accepted as indispensable factors needed for keeping the country strong enough to encounter the bitter enemies outside and to make the nation able to its internal solidarity by securing their people's food and clothes.

Just after the second global war had been over, women in America began to be involuntarily excluded and taken to the shaded side of the public circle. They were generally asked to return to their traditional role as dolls and to retreat from their active participation in the development of their society. Commenting on this idea, Rich says:

Your Ibsen volumes, violet-spined,

each flaking its gold arabesque!  
 Again I sit, under duress, hands washed,  
 at your inkstained oaken desk,

...

A DOLLS HOUSE LITTLE EYOLF

WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN (*CP*, p. 178)

The Ibsenian model seemed to be the mold post-war society needed women to follow. Hence, women were mostly required to go back to place themselves in the subordinate position which was meant to be that of the followers of men. In a masculine society, such as that in America at that time, women would certainly come second to men. Wright and Rogers stress the idea that “It was not until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 that discrimination against women in jobs, pay, and promotion was made illegal.” (p. 5) It seemed that the return of social marginalization was the reward women received after their noticeable contributions to the support and building of their nation during the time of need.

Did women submit to the restoration of the yoke of inferiority imposed on them by the masculine society? The answer was absolutely 'No'. Women started right away to oppose the retrieval of the concepts of male superiority. Females began to seek their distinctive identity and affirm it clearly. Feminism as a movement originated from such a stance. It came as “an act of resistance to patriarchy.” (Esposito, p. 94) Thus, female voices started to shout loudly calling for equality between men and women. Seeking feminism as a distinctive identity flowed strenuously throughout the veins of social life.

Women poets did not keep away from the attempts exerted to break the walls of the cages in which females were locked up. Like most other women, these writers did not want to continue living within the frames of the role drawn by society. They rather wanted to attack the concepts of their inferiority. This attitude could be traced back to the Nineteenth century poetry in America. Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), for instance, did not accept submitting to conforming to the role drawn by her society. She was not either a wife or a mother. Chunya clarifies that this outstanding poet’s “attempts to create herself... had to do with finding a way to be a woman who had authority and

authenticity in relation to all that are external to her.” (p. 66) She preferred her isolation and wrote poetry about her own feelings as a woman and a human being.

The era of modernism did not witness much change in the poetry written by female poets. At that time, there were prominent women poets like Amy Lowell (1874-1925), Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) and Marianne Moore (1887-1972). Commenting on the poetry written by these two writers, Dowson states that Lowell tended to “resist the relentless mythologies of femininity” in her writings, and that Moore similarly “defied all gender imperatives” in her poems. (pp. 7, 10) As for Bishop, it is apparent that she often showed neutrality towards the issue of gender for she herself had an uneasy relation to feminine world. (Goldensohn, p. 246) Such poets were aesthetically following the steps of outstanding male writers like T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972). Just like the poems of the masters of modernism, the poetry written by the aforementioned women did not saliently handle ideas taken from their lives as females.

The noted American female poet, Adrienne Rich, came to show the shift in the women's attitude towards the masculine controlled society. Orr sees that Rich “provides a triumph example to women, to poets, and, of course, to women poets.” (p.286) Ostriker adds that “Rich has been a heroine to many of us [women] for decades.” (p.13) She started her career as a poet by trying to penetrate into the circle of literary fame in the sixties of the twentieth century. The best way to do so was by producing works that attempted to conform to the literary, social and historical norms of her society. In one of her early poems entitled ‘The Kursaal at Interlaken’, she describes her love for her man in this socially orthodox way:

You will perhaps make love to me this evening,  
Dancing among the circular green tables  
Or where the clockwork tinkle of the fountain  
Sounds in the garden’s primly pebbled arbors. (*CP*, p. 56)

Thus, she “expressed...a fervent wish to close the doors in the face of oncoming storms, and to shut oneself into a safe place.” (Stein, p.2) The poet endeavored to distinguish herself a little bit from male poets by choosing somewhat different topics. However, the inclination of getting separated from men writers was not so radical as to reach and affect the poet's way of life.

Then, in the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century Rich began to adopt feminism as a style of life. To Pollitt, the noted poet represented “second wavers ... who made the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s and ’70s.” (p. 10) Coren adds that this writer “is a poet closely linked with a radical... form of Seventies feminism.” (p. 60) She decided to abandon the role of a wife or an opposite gender of man. To Sheridan, “Women’s liberation offered the ‘conditions’ in which she could at last overcome the split between woman and poet.” (p. 18) Rich consequently began to attack the masculine world which represented to her the root of evil and simultaneously refer to her love for another female in her lines:

You know, I think that men love wars ...  
 And my incurable anger, my unmendable wounds  
 break open further with tears, I am crying helplessly,  
 and they still control the world, and you are not in my arms.  
 (CP, p. 436)

The reason why the writer behaved so was that she believed it was the only way that could be employed to terminate man's dominance over her life.

To be able to follow a woman writer’s endeavor to bring to light her concept of feminism as a distinctive identity, one must ask a crucial question: is identity something fixed or unchangeable? The answer is ‘no’ for identity changes and develops over time. There are social, personal, political as well as historical factors which necessarily lead to the development of identity. These factors could be seen being reflected throughout man’s life. This idea has been obviated by indicating:

only one might be occupied at a time, when the lived reality of many is identification with more than one of them at the same time, or different configurations of one or more of them over the course of an individual’s life, or both.(Cole and Cate, pp.283,284)

The experiences a person goes through always leave their impact on the development of the way people look upon him or her as well as the way he or she thinks about himself or herself within the context of society. Such effects of the experiences accumulate and ultimately form the concept of one’s identity.

In her pursuit of seeking and affirming her identity as a female, Rich was keen on handling the issue in the light of two aspects. She attempted to develop her identity by focusing on her experiences in her daily life and her reaction to the generated

feelings expressed in her poetry. These two aspects form the autobiographical elements in her literature.

Lyrical Poetry is one of the most suitable kinds of literature for reflecting on life and expressing personal views. Hence, Rich was in favor of carrying out her pursuit for and the affirmation of identity as a female writer. Greenwald argues that, "through her work, [Rich] ... seeks to validate her own language and subjectivity as a truthful counter to the public lies." (p. 97) emphasizing this view, Gwiazda adds that Rich's poetry can safely "provide evidence of her growing preoccupation with the idea of civic responsibility, which she frequently ... approaches through explorations of her own personal life as a woman, feminist thinker, Jew, lesbian, activist, and poet." (p.166) One kind of lyrical poetry is known as confessional poetry which came to emerge during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Price illustrates that this type of poetry "seems to assume no reader, and speaks to little beyond the poet's own tiny life." (p. 1) Therefore, she tended to use her poetry to emphasize her distinction from men in general and male poets in particular. Her writings were bent towards the expression of the continuous development of the poet's search for identity.

In a way to achieve the above mentioned task, the researcher attempts to present through the paper a brief investigation of some of the confessional aspects revealed by Rich throughout her poetry. Gupta and Sharma say, "Confessional poetry flourished in America in the twentieth century." (p. 112) A definition of that term "is offered by Irving Howe, who argues that 'a confessional poem would seem to be one in which the writer speaks to the reader, telling him, without mediating presence of imagined event, or persona, something about his life.'" (Gupta and Sharma, p. 112) In Rich's case, her confessions are attained through the discussion of her autobiographical elements a number of her works. Therefore, the poet tries to uncover her views and her reactions towards what happened to her in her life as a woman struggling to affirm her feminine identity. She shows her sincere views about her experiences as a female in a man controlled society. Gupta and Sharma add that "the main objective of the confessional poetry is to unburden you heart to the reader with the poet's untold privacies like personal faults, sexual desires, psychological complexes and physical privacies." (112)

In this way, The noted poet digs deep into her life and uncovers her ideas and even her intimate feelings through her works.

Rich, a prominent American poet in both the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was born in the state of Baltimore in 1929. She made her debut in the fifties of the century. By the end of the decade she became an established woman poet. In 1952, she won a two-year scholarship to study in Europe. After her return, she married a Harvard professor, Alfred Conrad in 1953. Their marriage was crowned with the birth of four sons.

The distinguished female poet had a prolific literary career. She published several volumes of poetry which documented her quest and affirmation of her identity as a woman poet. These literary works presented her to the critics as "an enchanting poet." (Weisert, p. 360) Her first book *A Change of World* was published in 1951. The verses included secured her a noticeable position among the contemporary poets. The early publication brought her the Yale Younger Poets Award. Four years later, Rich published another volume of verse entitled *The Diamond Cutters*. In 1963, the third book of poetry written by the writer *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law*. What is so special about this volume is that the poems were accompanied with dates. This feature was thought to be important because the author believed that the connection between a work of art and what happened in personal life was worthy consideration. Throughout her third collection, the author was trying to depict her life and reflect on her personal experiences. In a way, she was seeking for her identity as a woman.

At the time, Rich was suffering from double-sidedness in her life. She had to undertake two roles. At home, the writer had to spend almost all her time taking care of her sons and husband. This was incarnated in her duties as a mother and a wife. In the literary context, moreover, she had to develop her skill as a poet and to work hard to fulfill her literary ambitions. This is what Chametzky calls the "multifaceted identity" Rich had to embrace. (p. 418) On both sides, she aimed at perfection but what was achieved was far less than this. She was sharply divided between the two roles. Consequently, she rarely felt satisfied with what was realized in this regard; she used to heap blame over herself for not devoting herself totally to her family life.



Rich's family left for New York city after the death of her father in 1964. This step marked the beginning of the most important stage in her literary career. She worked as a teaching staff member at Columbia University. In 1966, the writer published a collection of poems entitled *Necessities of life*. Through these poems the female poet's attention began to be directed towards the discussion of political issues. Another volume of poetry entitled *Leaflets* appeared in 1969. The poet tried in this book to continue addressing the same political concerns.

In the following years, Rich started to teach at the City College of New York. There, she met other prominent female American writers like Alice Walker (1944- ) and Gwendolyn Brooks (1917- 2000). Due to the ongoing development of her pursuit of her female identity, she found it was absolutely difficult for her to continue living with her husband and to overlook the chasm in she had been suffering from since the beginning of her marriage. As a result, she got separated from her husband who killed himself later on.

Rich's two important collections of poetry entitled *The Will of Change* (1971) and *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) showed the writer's constant tendency towards feminism. She decided to become an active member in the women's movement. The poems included in these books revealed the author's resolution to express her feminism overtly and courageously. She started the process of exploring herself as well as the relations with other women. She handled taboos related to the relationships between women in clear-cut and audacious terms. All her interests pushed her to become one of the leading figures in the women's movement, and above all a fervent activist in feminism. Hence, she was not trying to write "protest poetry" but rather "dissident poetry" which did not mirror life but worked to change it. (Teare, p. 28) Accordingly, Rich dared to break the taboos besieging the world of females. In her writings about her raids to invade the hidden world of women, the writer tried to rely mainly on the experiences taken from her own life.

In the 1980s, the great feminist poet decided to look at life as one whole. She tended to bridge the gap between what was personal and social in her world. Witonsky points out that Rich "The feminist movement was key to turning anger away from

herself, outwards into political efforts for social change.”(p. 341) To her, it is difficult to deal with women’s agony in isolation from that of the whole society. Ostriker sees that Rich “is a poet for whom the suffering self and suffering world are inseparable.” (p.13) The new collection of poetry *Your Native Land, Your Life* shed light on the painful experiences in her life as a woman as well as the suffering of women in their society. Such a vision could reflect the struggle she went through either with her father or her husband in her past. In this way, Rich's poetry serves as an honest mirror which can reflect how the poet attempts to show the private and general issues in her society. Just as she was trying to speak for herself and to express her own concerns as a female in a masculine society as well as for all women and their suffering due to the oppressive domination of males.

The dichotomy of Rich's thematic concerns can be seen covertly in her early poems and quite overtly in her late ones. The famous American feminist's interest in the private issues taken from her personal life and the problems facing women for their gender is obviously incarnated in her late poetry. The two sides are not separated. Rizza calls this approach the “spilt perspective: the distanced, comprehending poet’s voice and the voice that is defined by relationships to men.” (p. 63) Throughout her career, Rich attempted to benefit from her personal experiences in order to develop her poetry both thematically and stylistically. At the same time, she was exploring the female world aiming to achieve the solidarity of all women whither white or black, young or old in the face the male-dominated society. Delsandro states that "For Rich, a white woman, to continue this feminist work requires the recognition and integration of black as well as lesbian feminism, political movements raising their voices in the 1970s both in the academy and on the street." (p. 92) This view can indicate how this prominent poet was concerned about the dilemma all females were facing everywhere.

When she was still a young woman, Rich followed the norms of her society. She married and became a mother. Her husband was a respectable man. She had three sons. These personal facts about her life indicate her submission to the social obligations. However, her early poems showed her grumbling about the institutions of marriage and motherhood. In the poem 'An Unsaid Word', the poet drew on a material taken from her

personal life before marriage. Remembering how her father used to treat her mother harshly, and how submissive the wife was, Rich indicates the oppression inflicted on women by stating that such a relationship was not based on the terms of equality. It was like slavery. So, the wife, like all slaves, has no freedom in her life. She has to wait for her husband, or rather her master, until he comes home if he likes. Hence, the wife

...who has power to call her man  
From that estranged intensity  
Where his mind forages alone (CP, p. 69)

does not have the right to question him or to express resentment. According to the long-established social traditions, the husband is always free and the wife must wait for him to come whenever he likes. This is what happens within the system of slavery. The so-called equality between men and women is a mirage. This is one of the unsaid facts about women's life in the male-dominated society. It can be noticed here that the writer is not speaking about herself. She is rather referring to another woman. This point reveals her repulsion for such females who widely spread in her early poems, and who were submissive and reacted passively.

Later on, especially in the 1960s, the women appearing in Rich's poems began to find the right track in their lives by adopting a positive attitude and increasing their awareness of their actual status in society. Benjamin stresses that this poet had a "commitment to archiving feminist lives" in her society. (p. 628) For instance, in the poem "Novella", the reader can witness the beginning of Rich's announcement of her rebellion against the treatment of women in her society. The work tells a short story of a quarrel between a man and his wife. The former goes out in order to abate his resentment whereas the latter goes to the kitchen to do the dishes. She tries to express her anger by breaking some dishes. In the end, he comes back and she opens the door. This acts as a false denouement for the poet mentions how stars were shining in the sky but they were sporadically scattered. This final scene can be attributed to the skill of Rich as "a master of the telling shard of language broken off from some horrendous event." (Jarman, p. 143) The end of the story can be consequently perceived as a hint at what Rich wanted to happen between the couple. This slavery-like relationship should

not go forever. So, this intention can be seen in the writer's personal life. Getting separated from her husband was the only way to break the yoke of bondage.

The 1970s were a turning point in both Rich's life and poetry. During that time, she grew more and more dissatisfied with those social institutions mentioned above. Orr illustrates that "in time, [Rich's]...search for new meaning as both poet and woman led her to feminist, left-wing activism, through which she at last discovered her poetic voice." (p.286) She began to express her resentment in her poems. Cole and Cate see that "Rich's attention to the many ways heterosexuality was forced upon women began the job of teasing apart how heterosexuality might be understood as a patriarchal tool of control over women." (pp.279, 280) As one of the most ardent activists of the movement of feminism, the writer tries to seek alternatives for these social forms. Having intimate relations with other women was just a way of expressing protest against men. Such a form of relationships developed a lot in the next decade. Turning to women in this way came as the climax of the poet's pursuit of identity. It was also like a practical objection to the masculine-dominated society's views and laws.

In Rich's poetry, the reader may encounter the writer's feeling of anxiety stemming from her inability to accept the roles her society is trying to impose on her. She was aware of the fact that it was her gender that made her liable to succumb to the roles whose limits could never be crossed by a woman. In her early poetry she was attempting to express her grumbling against such a condition. However, after getting indulgent in the movement of feminism, she started to show audacity in raising her voice while attacking the boundaries set by the social concepts and traditions.

The year 1970 was a turning point in Rich's career. Then, her husband killed himself after their separation. The lack of communication between them led to the failure of their marriage. At the time, she was deeply considering the need to reshape her relationship with the other gender. The idea of the physical equality between men and women was obsessing her. Rich thought of disposing of her physical need as a woman for the other gender. She believed in the philosophical idea that men and women were physically equal. It was called the idea of androgyny. According to this concept, it was believed that the human creature had both the male and female qualities

within himself or herself. So, a woman could choose to activate either the male qualities or the female qualities within herself. This idea meant two things. The first point is that a woman could do without men whereas the second is that differentiating between males and females on a physical basis is wrong. Therefore, it is not acceptable to think that society could be divided into two distinctive communities: men and women.

Androgyny represented the best possible solution for Rich to solve conceptual problems she faced while she was looking for identity. This can be seen quite clearly in two of her poems entitled 'The Stranger' and 'Diving into the Wreck' (*DIVING INTO THE WRECK, 1972*). The speaker in these two works keeps roaming in streets and then delves into the sea in an attempt to pursue her. The mission of searching for the identity is not an easy one. This is achieved by reaching the idea of androgyny.

'Diving into the Wreck' (*DIVING INTO THE WRECK, 1972*) is a poem in which the woman poet seeks her identity. The wreck here represents the poet who has been demolished in the masculine society. The character presented focuses on reading a book of mythology hoping that it can assist her to discover herself as a woman. Unfortunately, like all the books of legends, that one is full of unreal concepts about the world of women. Nothing but fairy tales could be found. Failing to find answers to her questions about the distinctive identity of women, the speaker delves into the sea to search for the self:

We know what it is for,  
we who have used it (*CP, p.362*)

...

and there is no one  
to tell me when the ocean  
will begin. (*CP, p.363*)

...

I came to explore the wreck.

...

I came to see the damage that was done  
and the treasures that prevail.

...

the thing I came for:  
the wreck and not the story of the wreck  
the thing itself and not the myth. (*CP, p. 364*)

Diving into the sea is not an easy errand especially when there is no help. She could not act against the force of the sea but rather she has to identify herself within the context of the whole picture of the identity. The speaker goes down into the sea until she starts to find pieces of herself. She has to collect these pieces in a way that can help

her to reach her complete identity. The speaker endeavors to reach her identity. Then, she reaches the conclusion that she is a human being of mixed genders. She is neither a female nor a male. She is a mixture of both. The new identity places the woman in an area in which femininity and masculinity are mixed.

While moving forward towards the 1980s, Rich began to express her ideas about the relation between women away from men. Her treatment of such an issue was audacious and daring. She felt that there was no need for embarrassment when talking about this topic. Cole and Cate wrote about the way Rich embraced the discussion of this issue:

Rich develops a strategy for generating a deeply felt self-understanding of woman as an identity or subject position in a context defined by systemic patriarchal violence and domination. And she calls this strategy the lesbian continuum. But her argument is not aimed at simply gaining visibility for lesbians, at least not in any uncritical or predictable way. For Rich, the lesbian continuum is a strategic mechanism for generating politically viable identities and alliances. (pp. 281, 282)

This can be noticed quite clearly in volume of poetry which was entitled *The Dream of a Common Language*, and that was published in 1978. This collection can be safely considered as "an American poetry classic." (Fristoe, p. 72) The book, as the 'dream' used in the title indicates, addresses the difficult task of establishing a way of communication among people. Henneberg points out that, to Rich, the "differences between individuals, whether heterosexual or homosexual, cannot...entirely effaced by a common language." (p.172) However, in this volume of verse, the poet thinks that it is possible to found successful relationships between a woman and another whenever the interference of men has been deterred. This open attitude to show interest in homosexual relations led her to embrace lesbianism. Hence, she was called by Holladay a "vanguard lesbian-feminist author." (p. 59) Robson adds that this noted poet could be safely regarded as America's "premier lesbian poet." (p. 27) Although the term 'a lesbian' was frowned at by society for what it refers to, Rich insisted on considering herself as one.

By adopting lesbianism as a tendency in life, Rich was calling for war against her society together with its traditions and long accepted views. She thus embarked on a severe confrontation with society and its deep rooted conventions. At a time during

which lesbianism was a shame branded attitude or rather an inclination which would cause its followers social repulsion, the female poet dared to proclaim her lesbianism. In the 1970s, Rich decided to face her whole society and break the taboos. She believed that any woman could be a lesbian. Therefore, and because of the wide spreading notion considering such a homophile tendency as a source of evil, she was alienated in her social life, and became a recluse. She was hated by both men and women then.

In order to defend herself against such an accusation, Rich attempted hard to redefine her homophile tendency in a way that could shield her against the tsunami-like assail of society heaped on her. She believed that the tendency she adopted should not be taken within the restricted boundaries of the physical relationships. Rather it should be broadened to cover all the experiences which could be shared by women. The female world seemed to her to be vast enough to encompass all the affairs of women, all their interests, all their ideas and all their emotions. Hence, the lesbian world to her was the ideal world in which women could share their experiences together and drive men out of it. Since men were the source of agony and pain for women, so the latter had to build their own ideal realm far from them.

Accordingly, she began imbuing her poetry with such conviction about the ideal female world. In 1974 and for two more years she brooded over writing poems explicating her ideas about female love. Her volume *Twenty-One Love Poems* were the fruit of this period. The poet reflected on the emotional and notional potentialities of the ideal world of women. She also shed light on the possibility of proliferating romantic love among females. In spite of the fact that the poems included in the book could be understood in a broader sense to cover all romantic relations including those normal ones between a man and a woman, the author did not have the intention to make them seem so. The ambiguity of the nature of the love feelings arise from the idea that, whereas “she writes for ‘two women of one gender/two women of one generation,’ Rich is only too acutely aware that the available models for her poems have been the constructs of male white heterosexuals.” (Estrin, p. 24) Thus, she meant these poems to be based only on romantic love between a woman and another within the boundaries of the ideal world she was calling for.

In one of the poems presented in the book *Twenty-One Love Poems*, which is entitled ‘The Floating Poem – Unnumbered’, the poet creates two female lovers. Being one of these lovers, she focuses on the emotional experience between the two women. Her lover is like a world which could be explored by her. Or rather she represents

the half-curved frond  
of the fiddlehead fern in forests  
just washed by sun (CP, p. 443)

Both are afraid of what could happen to threaten this relation or cease this experience. Estrin asserts that “Kevin McGuirk... contends that in ‘Twenty-One Love Poems’ Rich works within a blatantly rhetorical tradition (corroborated even in the nineteenth-century- romantic poem).” (p. 24) The relation between the female couple is shown to be full of purity, emotion, passion and safety. It is a source of peace and kindness.

What can be asserted then is that Rich attempted to show interest both in the case of women in her contemporary world and that of females in the past. She expressed sympathy towards women in all times. The noted writer managed to extend her compassion to encompass almost all women. Supporting this view, Cookson states that “Rich’s poems are most grounded when she turns her sympathies to individuals with whom she obviously identifies as both artists and activists.”(p. 821) Seaman adds, “For all Rich’s shepherding us toward compassion and solidarity with those who suffer violence and injustice.” (p. 14) The renowned poet’s dominant motive was the feeling that these helpless creatures have been actually victimized by the world ruled by males. Therefore, in marital life, wives accept to be overshadowed by their husbands. The wife is supposed to stand all the time literally and metaphorically behind her man. When life thrives, few could mention her. Success is always attributed mainly to the husband. However, if the family faces failure, people tend to heap blame and even wrath on the wife together with the man. In short, the husband sometimes drags his wife to hell with him.

The theme of compassion for the wives who are punished because of their love to unworthy husbands has been tackled in the poem entitled ‘For Ethel Rosenberg’. In



this work, Rich reflects on the story of the Rosenberg. Ethel Rosenberg and her husband used to live in the city of New York in the forties and fifties in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were convicted of spying for the Russians. As a result, they were sentenced to death. Asserting that point, Stein says, "Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, alleged Communist spies, were executed—in the week that Rich was married." (p. 29) The poet felt deep sympathy for the wife. This miserable woman, from Rich's view, was the victim of both her husband and society. She did what she did out of loyalty to her husband. The reward of this devotion was death. Most people attacked her harshly. Even her mother and brother were against her. They were even witnesses in her case, and they participated in dragging her to the punishment. Stein puts it:

Rich could not push the memory of their execution aside. Sara Mandelbaum points to the connections Rich makes "between her own life and the fate of this woman,...raising complex and painful questions about loyalty and disloyalty, punishment and crime." (p. 94)

The writer assumes that had this woman been married to a better man, she would have been a successful person, and had a much better life. For getting separated from this criminal would have even saved her from this dark destiny.

The memory of this wife kept haunting Rich's mind:

Her figure sinks into my soul  
a drowned statue  
sealed in lead  
For years it has lain there unabsorbed... (CP, p. 508)

The feeling of sadness triggered off by this event was deep buried into the female poet. She could not dispose of it throughout her all life. There was no way to get rid of it. The victim was a woman hurt by her love for her husband as well as the apathy and even cruelty of fellow-women represented in her mother. Rich aimed at emphasizing the wife's helplessness. Rehm comments by indicating that this kind of "helplessness" from Rich's viewpoint comes as a "result of systems of knowledge and power in ... [her] own country." (p. 694) Therefore, the poet wanted to shower this wife with sympathy despite her tragic flaw. In so doing, Rich was attempting to toss the woman back to the compassionate world of females.

In 1963, Rich published a poem entitled 'The Trees'. Through this poem, the poet was trying to express her desire to revolt against her marital life with all its restrictions. Bere points out that "Unappeased, resolutely discontent, bold, revolutionary – all of these terms could be applied to Rich, who described herself as the woman 'with a mission ... to change the laws in history.'" (p. 551) Nonetheless, the treatment of this issue was not a direct one. She did not have the audacity needed to speak out her thoughts related to this inclination. Thus, the handling of the idea came in an implicit way. The literary work touches upon Rich's feeling of estrangement inside her house and her need to break its confinements so as to go and mix herself with the world outside. The words that are required to express the writer's wish to leave her family and pursue her identity are metaphorically seen like trees. These trees are struggling hard to come out of the land and reach a forest. They are breaking the walls of the house and reach out for the spacious place of the forest. The place outside the house is in bad need of these trees:

The trees inside are moving out into the forest,  
 the forest that was empty all these days  
 where no bird could sit  
 no insect hide  
 no sun bury its feet in shadow  
 the forest that was empty all these nights  
 will be full of trees by morning. (*CP*, p. 212)

These lines indicate "Rich's ...ability to marry metaphor with revelation." (Riel, p. 44) Therefore, the whole world is in need of women. This is the reason why the poet intends to depart and leave her house. She feels that the role which can be played by females is much larger than that one imposed on them by society. Submitting to such a role could mean to her wasting her life. Consequently, Rich as a wife decides to break the shackles fettering her and look for her rights as an individual who needs to interact with life actively. She wanted to show resonances of these attitudes in her poetry as well. Bere illustrates this point when he states that, to Rich, "poetry was a necessity, a fierce destabilizing force, a wave pulling...[man] further out than ...[s/he] wanted to be," suggesting, imploring, "...[man has] to change ...[his or her] life." (p.554) Thus,

Rich believes that she has not come to life to be just a wife or a mother. Rather, she has much more potentialities to affect the whole world.

In her volume *Twenty-One Love Poems* which was published between 1972 and 1976, Rich presents her poem 'Poem II'. In this literary work, the poet seems to have reached the shore of the ocean of her crisis. The poem actually represents the point of affirming the writer's identity. Cole and Cate put it:

In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" Rich develops a strategy for generating a deeply felt self-understanding of woman as an identity or subject position in a context defined by systemic patriarchal violence and domination. (p.281)

It gets apparent now that Rich has realized the only way for women to build their own castle in which they could preserve their lives and keep their identity protected is to feel self-sufficiency and to rely only on their own potentials. Through the poem, the poet expresses her desire to tell the whole world about her love for another woman and even to walk with her female lover in front of the all people. She simply wants to accompany the other woman and:

to move openly together  
in the pull of gravity, which is not simple,  
which carries the feathered grass a long way down the upbreathing air. (*CP*, p. 435)

Just as these lines show, Rich was aspiring earnestly to get both the recognition of her lesbian emotions from society as well as their acceptance of the attitude. Gwiazda comments that the aim of writers like Rich is primarily to address most people in their societies. He emphasizes the idea by stating that "The primary challenge for ...[a] poet, accordingly, is to strive for an expanded, though never fully defined poetry audience."(p.171) She believed it was her right as a woman to choose her partner no matter how other people may look on this. Of course, this could definitely include the recognition of women's right to have erotic relations among themselves. Bohm indicates that, to Rich the emotion which could connect two women with each other as lovers can be safely considered a kind of "chivalrous love" which includes such elements as "eroticism, secrecy, and danger." (p.193) These three elements show the

instinctive power of this tie together with the need to keep it a secret to avoid the dangerous reaction of society.

But, as her late poetry indicates, she found herself in confrontation with social and religious norms which defeated her attempts and tossed her back to her psychological and mental seclusion encompassing all humans who bore ideas similar to hers. Orr indicated that “as a gifted young writer, Rich found success, but found it hollow.” (p. 286) Hence, in her 1991 volume of poetry entitled *An Atlas of the Difficult World* which was described as “one of the most powerful and humane books of poems of recent years” (Baker, p.167), Rich exposes how difficult the world has become for her. She seems to refer to the idea that her poetry has been an attempt to draw a geographic sketch of the human world with all its conventions, traditions, tendencies and emotions. The title significantly refers to the titan named Atlas who is mythically cursed to carry the sky permanently. Just like this legendary figure, Rich has been carrying the burdens of the female world throughout her whole life. She says, “In the America where I’m writing now, suffering is diagnosed relentlessly as personal, individual, maybe familial.”(p. 34, *The Nation*) Hence, Gwiazda adds:

Rich began the latest phase of her career, in which she considers her life and writing in relation to larger problems of American history. "An Atlas of the Difficult World" can still be seen as a poem addressing the unfulfilled promise of the women's liberation movement. Some of the individuals featured in the poem happen to be women and the way in which Rich depicts their oppression by forces of misogyny and homophobia ... illustrates her continuing commitment to radical feminism. (p.165)

She implicitly hints at the idea that she grew discontent with these concerns which have made her life a cursed one.

In the first section of the long poem ‘An Atlas of the Difficult World’, Rich ponders upon the incorrigible conditions of women in the whole world. This human concern could guarantee “her poetry survives the wreck of...[the] present” conditions of life. (Tejada, p.250) She rather seems to be a mouthpiece through which the grumbles of females can be heard. Rich herself stresses that “Maturity in poetry...means finding our rightful, necessary voices in a greater conversation, its tones, gestures, riffs and rifts.” (p.34, *The Nation*) The following lines taken from the

poem act truly as a crystalized vision held by the poet to indicate the distilled suffering of women in the masculine-dominated world:

I don't want to hear how he beat her after the earthquake,  
tore up her writing, threw the kerosene  
lantern into her face waiting  
like an unbearable mirror of his own. I don't  
want to hear how she finally ran from the trailer  
how he tore the keys from her hands, jumped into the truck  
and backed it into her. I don't want to think  
how her guesses betrayed her - that he meant well, that she  
was really the stronger and ought not to leave him  
to his own apparent devastation. I don't want to know  
wreckage, dreck and waste... (CP, p. 664)

In a very artistically condensed way, the author draws a scene including many pictures which reflect the distilled agony of women in the realm of men. This point can certainly prove how “Art and conviction have always mixed well in Rich’s work.” (Hoffert (ed.), p.94) Therefore, the readers can see a woman being beaten by her man, another deprived of her writing, and a third hit mercilessly with a lantern in the face. The images of oppression keep trickling down through the above verses. Sharkey comments by stating that “One form that has appeared in Rich’s ...[poetry] is the set of loosely related sketches that read like entries in a poet’s notebook.” (p. 46) Thus, this is a woman whose man takes keys away from her and drives his truck into her – holding the keys at first shows how the woman wanted to earnestly keep the man with her. She thought he did not have such a bad intention for her. These violent images could reflect how the writer “sees violence and rage as integral to our society.”(p. 272, Jaeckle) In brief, Rich states that women’s lives are nothing but ruins and waste.

As stated above, just by probing the poetry written by Adrienne Rich, one could reach the conclusion that her poetic production followed the shifts in female writers’ thought of the position of women in society. It is clear that in a confessional way, the outstanding literary figure attempted to discuss the changes which came over the themes related to femininity as reflected in what happened in her lifetime. The poet started her poetic career by speaking about her normal feelings towards males. Little by little, she began to reconsider the position as well as rights of women. This led her to

embrace the world of feminism. In this way, she became a hardened activist in this movement. She consequently devoted her poetry to promulgate the concepts of feminism through which she could defend women against the oppression of men.

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