

From the Deliberately Tremulous to the Distinctively

Powerful:

The Changing Female Voice in Selected Poetry of

Adrienne Rich

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the different shifts of female voice in Adrienne Rich's poetry according to Elaine Showalter's categorization of the female experience as discussed in her feminist theory. Showalter's theory identifies three phases for the development of the female experience. The first is the "feminine" phase which marks woman's outright submission to male norms and lifestyle. The Second is the "feminist" phase in which woman starts to recognize bias and proclaim suffering due to the injustices and oppression of a patriarchal society. Showalter's final phase is the "female" phase in which woman has the courage and power to live freely, create her own world and show her potential for self-assertion. Showalter's three-phase category of the development of female experience fittingly applies to the development of the poetic persona's female consciousness in Rich's feminist, poetic discourse. Rich's poetic persona passes through three different phases of development defined by a change of voice in each phase. In the first phase, there appears the tremulous voice of a deliberately helpless, male-dominated woman. In the second phase, the weaker, hesitant voice is transformed into the protesting voice of a rebellious, dreaming woman.

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Finally, in the third phase, there emerges a powerful voice of a defiant, resolute woman.

Keywords: Adrienne Rich, feminist poetry, Elaine Showalter, feminist critical theory.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the different shifts of female voice in Adrienne Rich's poetry according to Elaine Showalter's categorization of the female experience. Showalter's feminist theory is selected as a theoretical framework due to the fact that her three-phase category of the development of female experience fittingly applies not only to the development of Rich's poetic career as a feminist poet but the development of her poetic persona's female consciousness as well.

In her poetry, Rich explores the possibilities of female empowerment and outright repudiation of the rigid conventions of a patriarchal society. Her poems are, therefore, remarkably charged with a myriad of negative and positive emotions ranging from dissatisfaction, anxiety and indignation to protest, rebellion and determination. Rich's poetry, in this sense, is regarded as a feminist poetic discourse through which she advocates women's rights of social, economic, political and even intellectual freedom away from patriarchal constraints. She also expresses women's need for self-assertion. Furthermore, Rich's feminist poetic discourse as

such investigates women's aspirations to fulfill their potential and their preoccupation with their self-images as creatively powerful entities. The main focus of all such female concern in Rich's poetry is not merely to depict women's quest for a female identity but to attempt a poetic account of the entire experience of forming female consciousness. In other words, Rich's poetic discourse simply attempts to provide what Showalter (1977) identifies as "a thorough understanding of what it means ... to be a woman" (289). To attain a full awareness of her femininity, Rich's poetic persona, thus, passes through different stages of development defined by a change of voice in each stage. This change of female voice, as Mary S. Strine (1989, 25) contends, is more or less an obvious embodiment of women's tactful struggle for creating the distinctive identity of powerful women who are, ultimately, able to live a life of their own.

Literature Review:

Adrienne Rich's poetry has been much discussed by scholars and critics. This critical concern has partly focused on analyzing the development of Rich's poetic discourse. Jeannette E. Riley (2016), for instance, in her seminal book *Understanding Adrienne Rich*, traces the chronological development of Rich's poetic career. Her discussion of Rich's poetry provides a concise historical, political and feminist interpretation of some selected poems. It also provides a

critical overview of the poet's contribution to the American literary scene by shedding light on her poetry collections and prose works.

Similarly, Sandra M. Gilbert (2016) in her article "A Life Written in Invisible Ink", analyzes the development of Rich's poetics from her early feminist works till her last prophetic poetry. She focuses her analysis on how Rich's personal experience is aptly conveyed in her early volumes. She also explains how Rich's later poetry marks a shift from the personal to the public.

In addition, Albert Gelpi (2017) in his article "Powers of Recuperation: Tracking Adrienne Rich," presents a reassessment of Rich's poetic achievement throughout her career. He discusses her work as a philosophical study of social and personal change. He also stresses the personal as well as the political nature of Rich's poetry particularly in her later works.

Other critics, on other hand, address diverse feminist issues in Rich's poetry. In her book *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson and Adrienne Rich*, Wendy Martin (1984), for instance, studies Rich's poetic discourse from a feminist perspective. She also investigates significant aspects of Rich's personal life well as her feminist concerns and how they are reflected in her poetry.

In a similar vein, Krista Ratcliffe (1996) in her phenomenal book *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions: Virginia Woolf, Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich*, sheds light on the rhetorical theories of the three writers. She explains how these theories can be placed within the feminist approach. Her aim is to blend the rhetorical within the feminist.

Likewise, in "Wrestling with Those "Rotted Names": Wallace Stevens' and Adrienne Rich's "Revolutionary Poetics", Jacqueline Vaught Brogan (2001) discusses the political strain of Steven's poetry and how it has a great impact on Rich's feminist poetry. She also focuses on the radical aspect of Rich's feminist poetic discourse illustrating how it is palpably embodied in Rich's later poetry.

In addition, Alexandra J. Gold (2017) in "Adrienne Rich's Persistent Survival", attempts a close analysis of Rich's feminist poetry focusing on its social, historical and political dimensions. She also sheds light on the thematic and technical aspects that characterize Rich's poetry throughout the stages of its development.

Moreover, in her article "Love Poetry, Women's Bonding and Feminist Consciousness: The Complex Interaction between Edna St Vincent Millay and Adrienne Rich", Artemis Michailidou (2006) attempts a comparative study of the love poetry of both Rich and Millay. The aim of the comparison is

to show how Rich's poetic expression of love is largely influenced by Millay's erotic poetry. She concludes her article with the argument that Millay's love poetry paves the way for the emergence of lesbian poetry with its focus on women – women relationships.

Theoretical Framework

The present paper draws heavily on Elaine Showalter's feminist theory promulgated in her seminal book *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) and her revealing essay "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1997). In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter delves deeply into an investigation of what exactly defines a woman and analyzes the remarkable development of the female experience from a feminist perspective. In other words, Showalter presents a historically accurate account of the development of Woman's identity and her female consciousness. In this sense, her feminist theory, as Raman Selden et al. (2005, 127) remark, identifies the ideological, sociological and psychological aspects which primarily form the main tenets of the female experience.

In addition, in her essay "Towards a feminist Poetics", Showalter (1997) identifies two distinct approaches to feminist criticism. The first is male-centered and is known as "the feminist critique"; whereas the second is female-centered and is termed as "gynocritics" (216). The feminist critique

approach, according to Showalter (1997, 216-217), is basically associated with the role of woman as a passive recipient and imitator of male-oriented culture. Such a culture produces stereotypically traditional patterns of female characters who appear more or less as obedient, self-sacrificing, reticent, dependent, inferior and submissive. The gynocritics approach, on the other hand, discusses woman as the disseminator of a culture, language, experience and ideologies of her own. Woman here is introduced as an active agent, autonomous, initiative and self-possessed.

Moreover, Showalter's (1977) feminist theory identifies "three phases" for the development of the female experience (13). The first is the "feminine" phase which marks woman's outright submission to male norms and lifestyle as well as the repression of her social and physical needs and emotional desires for the sake of conforming to prescribed social roles and norms of a patriarchal society. In this first stage, woman, according to Showalter (1977, 15), appears to be a blind follower of man in both disposition and lifestyle. Consequently, she deliberately represses her sense of womanhood. In addition, the male-dominated society plunges her into the domesticity of marriage and family life. She, thus, sacrifices her personal freedom and abandons her sense of selfhood. This self-abnegation, nonetheless, does not negate woman's unique personality. Woman tactfully resorts to the

concealment of her potential and her physical and emotional demands. In other words, she, as Showalter (1977) puts it, "transcends her female identity" (21).

The Second is the "feminist" phase in which woman starts to recognize bias and proclaim suffering from the injustices and oppression of a patriarchal society which deprives her of her rights in all aspects of life whether socially, politically or economically. This second stage is distinctly associated with woman's emerging desire to reveal her true self as well as her capabilities. Woman here contemplates the faint possibility of changing the standards of the patriarchal society in order to have equal opportunities with man. She, as a result, completely rejects all the social and ideological confines which are mainly intended to strip her of her real sense of womanhood. She also revolts against the biased, social norms of a male-dominated society and, simultaneously, seeks to assert her right of living freely without limitations or social restriction. To achieve this, woman is involved in a self-determination struggle against the oppression of the patriarchal community. She defiantly strives to express her womanhood and remove all the restrictions imposed on her. During this prolonged struggle for self-assertion, woman, by inclination, resorts to the world of fantasy. Here, she creates, as Showalter (1977, 159) notes, an imaginary world to which she flees away from the oppression and domination of a

degrading, patriarchal system. This female world of fantasy, as Showalter (1977, 31) explains, is obviously characterized by an antagonistic attitude towards men and the rejection of marriage and family roles imposed on women.

Showalter's (1977) final phase is the "female" phase in which woman has the courage and power to live freely, create her own world and show her potential for self-assertion (13). In this third stage, woman seeks to assert herself by emphasizing her singularity in all facets of life. She, thus, probes her unique, female world and explores her own capabilities, concerns and challenges. Woman is now able to develop her self-perception, attain her emancipation and satisfy her formerly repressed desires. What matters for her now is her self-fulfillment and the way she maintains, for herself, a distinctive position in society. Hence, she explores new aspects of the female experience. For instance, woman, as Showalter (1977, 35) observes, is now daring enough to discuss such taboo topics as sexuality, the autonomous world of female relationships as well as the fulfillment of woman's political and economic aspirations.

What is essentially remarkable about Showalter's discussion of the three phases of female development is its objective treatment and unprecedented evaluation of the entire female experience. Showalter's feminist conceptualization as such reflects her deep understanding of the real sense of

womanhood. What follows then is an exploration of the changing female voice in Rich's selected poems in terms of Showalter's feminist approach.

The Changing Female Voice in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich:

Adrienne Rich's poetry, as Ed Pavlic (2021) rightly remarks, is a poetic display of "successive phases of progressive human realization" (3). Accordingly, her poetry is divided into three phases in terms of developing a distinct female voice and a well-defined identity.

The first phase clearly reveals Rich's concern with woman's unarticulated dissatisfaction with her male-dominated family life and her prescribed role as daughter and mother. This first phase is aptly represented by Rich's portrayal of woman in her first three volumes: *A Change of World* (1951), *The Diamond Cutters* (1955) and *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963). What characterizes these three volumes is Rich's detachment from the female figures she delineates in her poems. She does not identify with any of them and, thus, creates an impersonal tone throughout the poems of these volumes. This is illustrated by her use of the third person pronoun 'she'.

The second phase, illustrated in *Necessities of Life* (1966) and *Leaflets* (1969), marks an obvious development in Rich's portrayal of the woman figure in her poetry. In this second

phase, woman's dissatisfaction with her life in a male-dominated society is developed into an explicit expression of anger and protest and a real desire to change her position in society. Rich's poetry, thus, shifts from the description of woman as being helpless and submissive in the first phase to an image of a protesting woman who is willing to change her situation and formulate her own identity to free herself from the grip of male authority.

The development of Rich's feminist poetics culminates in the third phase which is reflected in her later poetry including *The Will to Change* (1971) and *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978). Woman is depicted here as powerful, determined and self-assertive.

The image of a helpless, submissive woman is illustrated in "Storm Warnings" from *A Change of World* (1951):

The glass has been falling all the afternoon,
And knowing better than the instrument
What winds are walking overhead,
.....
... the wind will rise,
We can only close the shutters.
.....

This is our sole defense against the season (Rich 2016, 3-4).

Here the woman speaker aspires to assert her own identity but in vain due to her inability to take the initiative. The rhythm of life is changing rapidly and the woman cannot cope with this tremendous change. She is willing to find a position suitable to her in this changing world, but she is weak and fears the consequence of change. Life's tremendous change is represented in these lines by the stormy weather and the powerful elements of nature represented by the "wind" and the "black" sky. In other words, the turbulent natural world of the storm runs parallel to the chaotic social and domestic world of female suppression and male domination. The poem apparently reveals the persona's impotence and lack of control over such drastic, social changes. She seems to be helpless, defenseless and powerless. She, thus, remains invisible, confined and mute out of fear and anxiety.

The focus here is more on the description of her helplessness: "We can only close the shutters". Though she is expecting such a storm to happen, yet she cannot protect herself or resist its terrible effects. She has nothing to do but remain just watching and hiding because it is out of her control. Such a symbolic natural scene is skillfully described to drive home the idea of woman's unreadiness to effect change in a male-dominated community due to her lack of power and her fear of the consequences. This justifies why she

remains detached throughout the poem. The poem simply concludes on this note of detachment and resignation.

Another example of the helpless, victimized woman is illustrated in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" from Rich's volume *A Change of World* (1951). In this poem, a married woman named Aunt Jennifer falls victim to daily, domestic chores in a loveless, marriage life. She is dissatisfied with her suffocating life which restricts her freedom. She expresses her dissatisfaction through the picture of tigers she weaves on her artistic tapestry:

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty (Rich 2016, 4).

The tigers woven on the tapestry reveals what the woman lacks and wishes to have. It is her sense of pride, freedom, fearlessness and power. The picture of the tigers is, thus, her only way of asserting her selfhood, releasing her female energy and expressing her creative power. Yet, this kind of creative power and energy, as Mohamad Fleih Hassan et al. (2016, 6) argue, is wasted in vain, since it makes no real improvement or positive change in her dreadful, domestic life. Such artistic method of revealing the woman's hidden desires is contrasted to the grim, domestic realities of her own miserable marriage life symbolized by the "massive weight" of

her husband's wedding ring which "sits heavily upon" (Rich 2016, 4) her hand and, thus, thwarts her aspirations. Therefore, through the poem's persona, as Karen F. Stein (2017, 25) points out, Rich discloses the evils of an oppressive, patriarchal system which makes of marriage and family life a social burden. Unarguably, the woman finds herself entirely trapped by the conventional institution of marriage and all its obligations as evinced in these lines:

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid (Rich 2016,
4).

These lines make it clear that what the woman is able to achieve artistically on a tapestry can never achieve in reality. As such, the tigers of her needlework, as Usama Raslan (2019, n. p.) notices, psychologically compensate for her lack of self-fulfillment. Aunt Jennifer cannot throw off the shackles of her restricted marriage life and set herself free. The poem unmistakably reveals her helplessness as she is "mastered by" her marriage "ordeals." She is obviously trapped in her domestic life and she has nothing to console her except expressing herself through her tapestry pictures which reflect her unfulfilled aspirations. What is quite noticeable here is the detachment of the poem's persona who remains at a distance

from Aunt Jennifer by using a third person point of view. This detachment is deliberately intended to conceal her feelings of insecurity and dissatisfaction with the patriarchal confinements of marriage life. The irony of the poem's situation lies in the fact that marriage institution, which is supposed to provide security and stability to woman, turns out to be a source of pain, anxiety, suffocation and frustration.

Moreover, Rich's "Living in Sin" from her second volume *The Diamond Cutters* (1955) is mainly concerned with the disillusion of a woman regarding her love relationship. At the beginning of the poem the woman feels optimistic about her love affair. She never realizes that this relationship is already transformed into a loveless, intolerable life. This is due to her romanticized idea of domestic life which proves to be monotonous and dull. One morning she shockingly finds:

... the scraps
of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;
that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers
a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own—
envoy from some village in the moldings (Rich 2016,
71).

The woman, as depicted in these lines, is helplessly trapped by such daily house chores and, thus, cannot escape the demanding, domestic duties assigned to her. She is described here as a submissive woman who:

pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found
a towel to dust the table-top,
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove (Rich
2016, 71).

The woman here faces the unescapable reality of her situation. She remains hopeless about changing her intolerable life. Hence, she helplessly suffers and endures in silence. This is simply because she is aware of her inability to resist or even complain. Thus, she willingly has to accept her lot in life and perform her duties as dictated by a patriarchal society.

Furthermore, the woman's identity as a married wife, who is supposed to be loved and intimately respected, is completely transformed into a merely domestic machine or a robot and is required to fulfill her daily tasks and domestic responsibilities mechanically and endlessly without receiving any emotional support. Thus, her relationship with her life partner is doomed to failure and turns into a nightmare as evident in these lines:

By evening she was back in love again,
.....,,
she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming
like a relentless milkman up the stairs (Rich 2016,
72).

What upsets the woman and makes her regretful is the fact that the intimacy of her sexual relationship with her husband turns into a mechanical, daily task. What is being sinful, as

evoked in the poem's title, is this emotionless relationship. What is more sinful, indeed, for the woman is her self-denial by allowing such a failure relationship to continue regardless of its humiliating impact on her womanhood. She is so overwhelmed by a sense of boredom and frustration that she starts to feel worried about her future life. Yet, she cannot evade the burdens of her life as she is fully controlled by societal obligations dictated by a patriarchal community.

The image of the helpless woman still persists in the title poem of Rich's third volume, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*. The poem has an ironic title in the sense that woman has no specific identity of her own outside marriage relationships. The poem presents a traditional conflict between an aged mother and her daughter in law. This outer conflict runs parallel to an inner conflict inside the daughter in law.

The mother is negatively described as a woman "with useless experience" (Rich 2016, 117). who is always suspicious of her daughter in law and is fond of spreading rumors about her. She is concerned about her physical appearance and the knowledge of music as evinced in these lines:

You, once a belle in Shreveport,
with henna-colored hair, skin like a peachbud,
still have your dresses copied from that time,
and play a Chopin prelude (Rich 2016, 117).

The mother in law is depicted here as a woman who is only preoccupied with how to maintain her beauty and her ideal image so as to be accepted by her male-defined society. She, thus, wastes her youth beautifying herself by using ornaments and keeping herself well-dressed. The poem opens with the woman persona addressing her mother in law using the second subject pronoun 'you' to create an accusatory tone. The woman blames her mother in law for her submissiveness and adherence to the male-defined, social norms. She also scolds her for being a target of ridicule due to living on such past memories as playing the music composed by Frederic Chopin who dates back to the Romantic age.

The daughter in law, on the other hand, refuses to be a copy or imitation of her mother in law, as she seeks to have her own identity. She now suffers an inner conflict as a result of the duality of self. The first perception of self, as Mohamad Fleih Hassan and Rosli Talif (2014, 71) explain, is an external one and is represented by the dictates of a humiliating, patriarchal system; whereas the second is psychological and is represented by an inner drive to reject patriarchal hegemony.

The daughter in law is, thus, torn between two difficult alternatives: either to live according to the traditional, restricted style of her mother in law or to liberate herself from all societal, domestic commitments and live a life of freedom. Choosing the first alternative would make her socially

accepted and even flattered. Choosing the second alternative would be a serious crime for which she deserves "solitary confinement". In this sense, she suffers a severe, inner conflict between discontent with patriarchal, traditional domesticity and desire for a female, liberated self. The severity of her conflict comes as a natural consequence of her anxiety, restlessness and fear of being stigmatized as a monster for just attempting to throw off the shackles of patriarchy.

In the concluding lines, the poem's persona contemplates the future of the woman who prefers to lead a life of freedom. She then can have an identity of her own, feel proud of her potential and feel "at least as beautiful as any boy" (Rich 2016, 121). The female persona is waiting for the emergence of such a type of woman but for the time being, she is still detached and finds it really difficult to identify with such a woman because she is not ready nor willing to take the risk.

Leading a life of freedom is compared to passing through a door in Rich's short poem "Prospective Immigrants Please Note" from her third volume *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963). The same conflict of alternatives is contemplated again in this poem. The poet here focuses on the risks of passing through the door to a new life of one's own. It is a door which leads to the world of self-knowledge and self-fulfillment:

If you go through

there is always the risk
of remembering your name.

.....

If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily
to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely
but much will blind you,
much will evade you (Rich 2016, 150-151).

The door described in these lines leads to an irrevocable life. It is a mysterious and risky kind of life in which one is transformed into an immigrant or stranger. The poem, thus, poses a difficult situation for the poem's persona to bear. Both choices available are not a source of relief, but one has to choose anyway. Yet, the poem's persona contemplates the consequences of the two possibilities. She is probably hesitant to take the risk because she is not ready to pass through the door. In other words, the woman is not daring enough to take adventurous risks or to challenge the traditional norms of society. The grip of patriarchal authority upon her is too strong to be resisted. This is signified by using the second person pronoun 'you' which creates a sense of detachment and aloofness. The poem's persona is, thus, suffering a conflict of

choices and feels insecure. As a result, she lacks determination and courage to strike a new ground.

What is quite remarkable in Rich's poems of the first phase is the fact that Rich, according to Nahid Mohammadi (2013, 24), prefers to be detached and remain at a distance from her female persona as is evident in the poems explored. In so doing, she attempts to maintain a superficial mask of reticence and powerlessness. Furthermore, Rich shows her female personae to furtively follow specific strategies to evade direct confrontation with a male-dominated society. For instance, women, as Soghra Nodeh and Farideh Pourgiv (2012, 231) argue, resort to suppressing their desires, concealing their concerns, falsifying their emotions, negating their sense of power and creating alternative personalities for themselves. Such strategies, as Shaymaa Gamal Ahmed (2017, 6) observes, are obviously foregrounded in Rich's first three volumes, *A Change of World* and *The Diamond Cutters* and *Snapshots of a Daughter -in- Law*. In these volumes, Rich, it is true, reveals her preoccupation with woman's helplessness, muteness, impotence and submissiveness within a societal, patriarchal framework. Women's helplessness, however, is a strategic move and a tactful, furtive disguise to conceal a vigorous sense of power.

The female voice introduced in the second phase of Rich's portrayal of her poetic persona is no more muted, tremulous or

hesitant. It is the voice of a protesting, rebellious woman. The poetic personae in the poems of the second phase, according to Mary Slowik (1984, 156), variously express their feelings of anger and resentment. Such furious feelings are, nonetheless, constructively released in a way that helps women face their predicaments rather than evading them. Woman here is still suffering oppression and injustice. She is denied her rights of living autonomously. Hence, she rejects societal constraints, revolts against male authority and contemplates the possibility of changing her inferior position in the patriarchal system. In this sense, this second stage of development, as Milena Kostic (2006, 73) argues, is associated with woman's emerging desire to reveal her true self and her potential. Such a woman is aptly illustrated in Rich's poem "Nightbreak" from her volume *Leaflets* (1969).

The poem represents an outright rejection of the traditional patriarchal culture and ideologies. It depicts the woman speaker's struggle for self-assertion. One way to achieve this is to express her feelings of anger and discontent with her humiliating status within the patriarchal framework. She seems unable to fit properly into this oppressive, patriarchal system due to an abhorrence of its rigid traditions. In the opening lines she confesses:

Something broken Something
I need By someone

I love

.....

This anger unreal

yet

has to be gone through (Rich 2016, 265).

These opening lines obviously indicate the idea of a broken self which leads to feelings of split and indignation. The persona's description of her anger as "unreal" proves that in her personal life she has nothing in particular to feel angry about. Yet, this does not negate her angry feeling. The repetition of the word "anger" in these opening lines helps establish an irritating atmosphere of anxiety and restlessness for which the reason is invisible. The woman's anger still remains unreal and invisible, since there is no proper outlet for its expression. It is located in her subconscious and creates a split in her personality and she ends up as a psychologically broken self. It is her broken self which she needs to reclaim. She is stripped of her sense of womanhood and she loses herself to her social milieu and gains nothing in return but a broken self-image.

Yet, this humiliating life experience "has to be gone through" anyway. She is fully aware of its inevitability and, thus, she states explicitly: "I go on head down into it" (Rich 2016, 265). What matters for her is to gain a deep understanding of her situation and, more importantly, reach a

reconciliation with her broken self. This creates an inner conflict within the persona. Hence, she is suffering the severity of her experience which is so unbearable and yet unescapable that she complains of a divided self. The pressures and obligations assigned to women in a biased patriarchal society are responsible for breaking her sense of selfhood. However, "time", or history, is not to blame. It is the people themselves who represent the real threat due to their aggressiveness, violence and injustice toward the weak and the helpless.

Those helpless women try to escape and seek refuge away from the grip of the enemy. However, the persona decides not to follow this useless path: "I don't collect what I can't use. I need/what can be broken" (Rich 2016, 265). The poem reveals a sense of self-assertiveness here, since the persona, as Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin (2007, 50) rightly remark, abandons such traditional ways of manipulating her deplorable situation as reticence, concealment, passive endurance, muteness and submissiveness. She no longer relies on them for keeping her self-image. She proves to be unconventional and innovative in resolving her inner conflict. As such, the persona starts to be rebellious and resistant. She rejects her degradation and she is ready to struggle for changing the traditional, patriarchal view of her womanhood. Her character correspondingly fits into

Showalter's framework of the feminist phase. She has an emerging desire to reveal her powerful female nature. She is also daring enough to speak emphatically using the first person pronoun "I" referring to "the enemy" who becomes "invisible". She realizes that she has so long been the target of social abuse, discrimination and suppression that her "body is a list of wounds" (Rich 2016, 265).

Therefore, part of her courage is her strong determination to get rid of her old, submissive, broken self to be ready to collect her thoughts and start anew. The poem's title suggests that she needs a night break during which she gathers up her courage to challenge the enemy. Consequently, she will not be torn between meeting the patriarchal expectations of her, on the one hand, and her self-actualization, on the other. She is ready to face society's criticism and rejection. Ultimately, what she opts for is to gain self-reconciliation. In this sense she is able to create an autonomous identity out of the pieces of her broken self.

Similarly, in "Night-pieces for a Child", from *Necessities of Life* (1966), Rich revolts against the social tradition of child-mother separation during the early period of childrearing. The poem introduces a dramatically pathetic scene in which a mother utters her resentment at an oppressive, patriarchal convention which forces her baby to be isolated "three doors away" from her after childbirth:

Tonight I jerk astart in a dark

.....

almost hearing you breathe

in a cot three doors away (Rich 2016, 182).

The woman speaker here has a baby from whom she is separated. She suffers terrible nightmares dreaming of his crying and of his death. She utterly loses her sense of motherhood as she explicitly reveals: “Mother I no more am / but woman, and nightmare” (Rich 2016, 182). Here, she associates her childlessness with a nightmare. Societal, patriarchal conventions mercilessly take her motherhood. This justifies why she resorts to the world of fantasy and dreams. This woman’s dreaming at this stage, as Showalter (1977, 29) asserts, is the only possible way to escape the unbearable reality of her terrible, domestic world. For her, it is a world of darkness, loss and deprivation. That is why she dreams of “knives| and “murderous hider and seeker” (Rich 2016, 182). In her dreams she regards patriarchy as her only foe and seeks revenge for denying her motherhood.

The poem closes on a note of sorrow and sadness:

If I could hear you now

mutter some gentle animal sound!

If milk flowed from my breast again (Rich 2016, 183).

Here, the woman speaker can do nothing for her baby. She only wishes for hearing his voice and breastfeeding him. She uses a helplessly appealing tone addressing man's sense of humanity. What she wishes for reveals her need for practicing breastfeeding which is the least and the simplest of her rights as a mother.

Rich's persona, however, still remains passive and helpless as indicated by her wish with which the poem concludes. She only contemplates the possibility of eradicating these stifling conventions which dictate child-mother separation. Yet, in spite of the mother's passiveness, she is, at least, no longer silenced. She has an unmuted, angry voice of protest and resentment. She denounces the deprivation of her rights as a woman and mother. She continues suffering and feels victimized, it is true, but she never gives up complaining and struggling against male injustice and suppression. She dares to confront this oppressive, patriarchal system and voices her total rejection of such a humiliating system. She advocates her right as a mother and denounces patriarchy which turns her life into a nightmare.

What is revealing in the poems of Rich's second phase is the fact that the woman speaker is no more detached or a mere observer of the deplorable situation of other helpless women. On the contrary, she is involved and more concerned about women's rights. She uses the first person pronoun 'I' to

explicitly denounce all the social ills of a patriarchal system and to emphasize her demanding desire for the individuality and uniqueness of a free, womanly life.

The affirmation of woman's powerful voice is ultimately attained in Rich's third phase. This final phase marks the development of woman's image from being a helpless, submissive victim of oppression to a powerful woman who asserts her individuality and celebrates her freedom from all kinds of restraint. In Rich's later poetry of the third phase, the main focus is on woman not in relation to man, but woman as an autonomous self who has her own world of interests and concerns. Rich's poetic development during this stage obviously corresponds to Showalter's conceptual view of feminist criticism advocated in her gynocritics approach. Showalter (1997, 216-217) differentiates between two feminist attitudes prevalent in feminist thought: "feminist critique" and gynocriticism. The first is concerned with woman's status in a male-dominated society, and how far she successfully fits into the fabric of this male-centered society. The second feminist attitude, on the other hand, regards woman as an autonomous entity who is able to create her own untraditional world of experience, culture, language and thought. The character of such an autonomous woman is best illustrated in the heroines of Rich's poems "Planetarium" from her volume *The Will to*

Change (1971) and "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev" from *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978).

In "Planetarium" Rich presents the character of the German astronomer, Caroline Herschel, as a model of free woman. The poem, as Riley (2016, 35) recounts, is biographically based on Rich's field trip to a planetarium where she gets informed about Herschel's astronomical accomplishments.

Thinking of Caroline Herschel, 1750–1848,
astronomer, sister of William; and others.

A woman in the shape of a monster
a monster in the shape of a woman
the skies are full of them (Rich 2016, 301).

The poem's epigraph signals a remarkable development in Rich's depiction of woman. By mentioning the name of Caroline Herschel, she reveals the fact that she is no longer preoccupied with man's oppressive practices against woman or female submissiveness to man. Her main focus now is a female-centered world.

Defiantly, the woman speaker enumerates Herschel's astronomical achievements including the discovery of a star and eight comets. She, still more defiantly, reaches full identification with Herschel using the first person plural 'we'. In this sense, the woman speaker admires Caroline Herschel's personality and follows her model by asserting her capabilities

as a woman. Moreover, she is positively influenced by Herschel's achievements and is impressed by her individual talents. The woman speaker, thus, defiantly asserts: " I am bombarded yet I stand" (Rich 2016, 303). Here, she uses an exhilarating tone of pride forcefully emphasizing her sense of power. This explains why she repeats the use of the first person pronoun 'I' in "I have been standing all my life" and "I am a galactic cloud" (Rich 2016, 303). She also takes the initiative to challenge her patriarchal society and to be a voice of change. She decides to be:

... an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind (Rich 2016, 303).

These lines introduce the idea of change as the poem's motif. Woman, represented by Herschel, is changing the reality of her situation from powerlessness and deliberate resignation to power and active participation. She is also changing her self-image as well as man's expectation of her. No matter if she is regarded as a dangerous monster, she now possesses a powerful voice and a creative, challenging personality. She is now a powerful woman who is daring enough to set herself free from the bonds and shackles of authoritative patriarchy. Nothing can dissuade her from reconstructing her identity as a free woman.

What is particularly revealing in "Planetarium" is how Rich depicts woman's image of herself in contrast to man's view of her. The patriarchal view of women the type of Herschel is, unquestionably, a negative image regarding her as a monster. Woman's view of herself, on the contrary, is positively evoked as "an instrument in the shape of a women." Woman, in this regard, starts to be positive in life being able to get rid of patriarchal dominance and unify the energy of both her body and mind. Strikingly, Rich, through the poems of the third phase, attempts a definition of woman's new identity and assigns a totally different role to her. regardless of the contradiction between woman's real aspirations and the patriarchal expectations of her, Rich, nevertheless, motivates other women to follow Herschel's model, strive for freedom of body and mind, create autonomous identity and change their own lives accordingly.

In a similar vein, Rich "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev," presents another female model who is brave enough to challenge not only the power of men but the power of nature as well. This female modal is the famous Russian mountain climber, Elvira Shatayev. She has the courage to gather a group of women, form a team of professional female mountain climbers and lead them in various journeys of mountain climbing.

The poem's speaker is Elvira Shatayev herself who is proud of what she has achieved throughout her life. What counts more for her is the feelings of love and the sense of unity and sharing while asserting their selfhood. The speaker here uses the first person plural subject pronoun 'we' to emphasize this idea of unified action and collaboration:

In the diary I wrote: Now we are ready
and each of us knows it I have never loved
like this I have never seen
my own forces so taken up and shared
.....
we are moving almost effortlessly in our love (Rich
2016, 444).

These lines obviously evoke the sense of female unity and love sharing as the basis of their greatest achievements. Their sense of power is here derived from their collective action and their collaboration. They share one unified purpose. The woman speaker appeals to their sense of adventure and their common love as necessary, positive forces for their self-assertion. These women are ready to face the danger and take the risk regardless of the consequences. What matters for them is their sense of achievement which they have dreamed of fulfilling all their lives. Now they are fully satisfied with what they have achieved and feel that their lives are not wasted in vain as is evident in the speaker's message for her husband:

When you have buried us told your story
ours does not end we stream
into the unfinished the unbegun (Rich 2016, 444).

These women sacrifice themselves for the sake of other women who will continue what they have started. By so doing, they become immortal. Part of their immortality is the never-ending change they produce in the patriarchal community and the sense of challenge and self-confidence they implant in the hearts of women. Such courageous women finally manage to live through death by inciting other women to follow their path and assert their identities. In other words, these women are ultimately able to transcend their physical death. It is particularly significant that they die at the mount of achieving their greatest accomplishment after reaching the mountain peak. The power of woman, as described in this poem, is partly due to her ability to face danger fearlessly and unhesitatingly and partly to the possession of a strong will and determination to change the traditional dogmatic views regarding female impotence.

Unarguably, the characters of Caroline Herschel and Elvira Shatayev have shown their full potential and successfully achieved their targets. Each of them has a well-defined identity. Rich, as Cheri Colby Langdell (2004, 145) claims, identifies with them and proudly introduces them in her feminist poetic discourse as women models and as

representatives of the type of women discussed by Showalter and categorized as belonging to the third phase of her feminist theory. Both Herschel and Shatayev, it seems clear, reach full potential by emancipating themselves from societal constraints and creating a world of their own. They also assert their uniqueness and individuality by striking a new ground of female experience unexplored before. In a word, they come into their own by fully achieving not only their aspirations but the aspirations of all those of their gender as well.

Conclusion:

Rich's poetry, it seems now evident, addresses major social and family concerns from a feminist perspective. It also raises questions about the validity of the patriarchal system of society. In a sense, Rich's poetry reveals the real need for changing this system and for developing the role of woman in society. This process of woman's empowerment is primarily based on the recognition of woman as a free human being and the acceptance of her full participation in all fields of life.

Moreover, the development of a distinctive female voice, as suggested in the poems explored, requires a powerful, resourceful woman; a woman who is no more helpless, weak or submissive; a woman who defiantly rejects her imprisonment, challenges her restraint and containment and struggles against male domination. Such a powerful woman is not just satisfied with dreaming and merely contemplating

change. Rather, she is the one who is a positive agent in the process of social change. She is ready to take the initiative and is willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of other women. Rich's delineation of powerful women who possess all these characteristics is essentially based on a detailed poetic description of the gradual change of voice. In other words, the female voice undergoes a remarkable development throughout Rich's poetry. In her earlier volumes *A change of world*, *The Diamond Cutters* and *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, there appears the tremulous voice of a helpless, male-dominated woman. In her next two volumes, *Necessities of Life* and *Leaflets* the weaker, hesitant voice is transformed into the protesting voice of a rebellious, dreaming woman. Finally, in her later volumes including. *The Will to Change* and *The Dream of a Common Language*, there emerges a powerful voice of a defiant, resolute woman. Such a change of female voice, thus, becomes a controlling element in Rich's poetry and embodies woman's full awareness of her feminine experience.

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من التظاهر بالضعف إلى المجاهرة بالقوة: تغير صوت المرأة في أشعار مختارة

للشاعرة أدرين ريتش

ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة تغير صوت المرأة في أشعار مختارة للشاعرة أدرين ريتش في ضوء النظرية النسوية للناقدة إلين شوالتر، حيث يطبق البحث المراحل الثلاث لتطور خبرة المرأة كما حددتها إلين شوالتر في نظريتها على أشعار أدرين ريتش، وتتم المرأة كما صورتها ريتش في أشعارها بثلاثة مراحل: ففي المرحلة الأولى تظهر صورة المرأة التي تتظاهر بالضعف والاستكانة لتتجنب الصدام مع الرجل، وفي المرحلة الثانية يتحول صوت المرأة من الصوت الخائف المستكين إلى الصوت الثائر المتمرد، وفي المرحلة الثالثة تظهر المرأة القوية والتي يتميز صوتها بالحزم والإصرار.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أدرين ريتش، الشعر النسوي، إلين شوالتر، النظرية النقدية النسوية.