



**Shiraz University**  
**Faculty of Literature and Humanities**

**M. A. Thesis**  
**In English Language and Literature**

**DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST POETICS IN ADRIENNE RICH**

**By**  
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**January 2012**

## **In the Name of God**

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I– Soghra Nodeh (880249)– M.A. student of English language and literature at the Faculty of Literature and Humanities, hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own research, and that I have provided exact references wherever I have quoted someone. I also declare that the topic of my research is an original one and has not been worked upon before. I hereby promise not to publish the findings of this research and not to make it accessible to others without the permission of Shiraz University. Shiraz University holds the copyright on this research.

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**THESIS**

SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN PARTIAL  
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER  
OF ARTS (M. A.)

**IN**

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

**SHIRAZ UNIVERSITY**

**SHIRAZ**

**ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN**

**EVALUATED AND APPROVED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE AS:**

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***To My Lovely Parents***

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I acknowledge my sincere gratitude to Dr Pourgiv for providing me with the articles I was extremely in need of and did not have any access to, her insightful guidance during the process of writing the thesis and her precious comments on it. I also sincerely appreciate Dr Ghasemi and Dr Anushiravani for taking the trouble of reading the thesis and commenting on it. Moreover, I would like to acknowledge my gratefulness to Ms. Ghanbaralizadeh, one of my professors at Mazandaran University, for providing me with some of the sources which otherwise I could not find. Finally, I offer my special thanks to Ms. Sami for taking the trouble of ordering the books I needed and having them sent to Iran. Above all, I sincerely acknowledge my indebtedness and thankfulness to all the professors named here and those not mentioned here for all I have learned from them.

## ABSTRACT

# DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST POETICS IN

## ADRIENNE RICH

BY

SOGHRA NODEH

Rich's poetry, always renewing and transforming itself, is an incarnation of human growth and change. The present thesis, focusing on the stages of Rich's poetic journey from *A Change of World* to *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, through *Diving into the Wreck*, and finally to *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, aims at analyzing it in terms of Showalter's three phases of female literary development, that is, Feminine, Feminist and Female phase. These phases are, furthermore, traced through Showalter's linguistic and cultural model of gynocriticism trying to draw the conclusion that Rich starts her literary mission as a conservative formalist following masculine linguistics and aesthetics in the fifties and gradually finds the courage to question such a structure in the content of her poetry, still conservatively following the masculine form, in the sixties and then turns to an overt radical protest against the dominating masculine structure in the seventies and finally in the late seventies and early eighties turns to purely female aesthetics creating what Showalter in her cultural model of gynocriticism calls wild zone. The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter one covers the introduction, significance of the study and literature review. The second chapter focuses on Rich's conservatism in her Feminine phase in *A Change of World* and her transition towards an adventurous manner of writing in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*. The next chapter covers Rich's Feminist phase in *Diving into the Wreck*. Chapter four is devoted to Rich's Female phase in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*. The last chapter is a conclusion to the whole thesis.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*ALTO= A Literature of Their Own*

*A Wild Patience= A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*

*Diving= Diving into the Wreck*

*OLSS= On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*

*OWB= Of Woman Born*

*Snapshots= Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*

*WIFT= What is Found There*

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

A poem can't free us from the struggle for existence, but it can uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulating emergencies of our lives, the fabricated wants and needs we have had urged on us. [...] it is an instrument for embodied experience. [...] it reminds us in some way of our needs. (Rich, *What is Found There* 13)

It is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment- that explodes in poetry. (Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* 162)

#### 1. 1. Introduction

Having been brought up in a traditional male-oriented family under the supervision of Arnold Rich, a pathologist at Johns Hopkins University, and Helen Jones, who chose to live a traditional life subordinating her individual life to the life of her husband, Adrienne Rich began her writing career as a brilliant poet of the new generation in America. Apparently she was brought up as a "traditional submissive woman," like her mother, whose life circumstances are created by her father or other decisive male figures in her (poetic) life and whose poetry, consequently is to a high extent under the power of such masculine figures. (Martin 5)

By the publication of her first volume of poetry, *A Change of World* (1951), which was heavily admired by such male poets as W. H. Auden for its brilliant craftsmanship, Rich came to be known as a promise for the coming generation of the poets. But the reason that these poems are so much admired by such poets as

Auden is that they exactly go with the traditional male aestheticism such as the rigid rules of formalism. Moreover, as Auden holds, his admiration of these poems is due to their "promising sign [of] craftsmanship" since it is "evidence of a capacity for its detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible" (305). Therefore, the reason that Rich is admired by these male figures is that her poetry goes with their ideals of aestheticism and that, from the point of view of these male admirers, there is a detachment from the self (as a woman) in these poems; Rich even used third person or male personas in order to give voice to her ideas in her first writings.

However, Rich in her *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, (hence *OLSS*), talking about the doubtful male-oriented poetic process during her starting steps as a poet, maintains that "in those years formalism was part of the strategy- like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up barehanded" (40-41). Therefore, in order to be able to draw her feminist ideas home in a patriarchal environment, especially as a young unknown female poet, her only choice was to take a conservative approach. That was a habit of writing, internalized in her by being a student at Radcliffe, through which she could "win the approval of the judges" (Perloff 370).

However, Rich's poetic career changes and develops as her feminist poetics develops. *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, (hence *Snapshots*), published in 1963, is considered as her transitional work which departs from the formalism of her first poems and in which she portrays a less guarded portraits of women and a less covert delineation of feminist themes. In this volume of poetry Rich mainly focuses on such themes as women's "disenchantment" in marriage and the "craziness" that accompanies such a state in women. (Ratcliffe 109) But even in this volume there are still traces of conservativeness in Rich's rhetoric; even in the title poem, with its radical feminist themes, we do not see "I" pronoun as the persona of the poem. Rich, talking about the effects of a male-dominated culture on a woman's writing, mentions this poem saying that "I hadn't found the courage to do without authorities, or even to use the pronoun 'I'- the woman in the poem is always she" (*OLSS* 45).

*Diving into the Wreck*, (hence *Diving*), published in 1973 exactly at a time when women's movement was taking a new direction and a time when second-wave feminism was at its highest point of development, marks the next new direction in the process of Rich's feminist poetic development. In this volume of poetry, continuing with her previous feminist themes but in more radical terms, Rich delves into such questions as disparity between individual needs and "priorities of a larger society." Rich in this volume of her poetry draws on the necessity of reinventing cultural standards in feminist terms. Some of the poems in this volume of Rich's poetry also urge the necessity of making up a female community, which was one of the central goals of the feminist movement of 1970s, in order to enable women to "express their true power;" a power which is suppressed during the whole history under the power of patriarchy. (Martin 188)

In her next volume of poetry, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, (hence *A Wild Patience*), published in 1981, which is considered as a "feminist vision," Rich comes to a more directly woman-centered vision by poems devoted to either famous female writers or anonymous women. (Kilgore 367) Therefore, Rich in this collection of poetry, revolving around "history and its distortions," focuses on stories of particular women, from Emily Dickinson, Susan B. Anthony, Jane Adams, or her grandmother, to anonymous women, in an attempt to draw her feminist themes regarding the roles that culture has imposed on women throughout history and, thus, calling for a purely woman-centered vision and a genuinely female art form in her poetry. (Schreiber 368)

Therefore, as one can see through this chronological account of Rich's poetic career, Rich undergoes a process of change in her style and attitude of writing due to the effects of patriarchal culture on her writing along the process. But the important fact is that during the whole process of her writing, even at the time when her poetic style of writing was in accordance with male aesthetics, the voices of women and female themes could be traced in her poetry. Rich devotes her writing career to drawing on women's problems in a patriarchal society, the ways that patriarchy tries to oppress women, and women's reactions towards these problems.

## **1. 2. The Significance of the Study**

Though there is a bulk of critical works written on Rich's poetry and prose as a feminist writer's works, none of them has been devoted to a thorough analysis of the development of her feminist poetics from her very beginning steps as a female writer with regard to her gradual movement from conservatism to radicalism in reflecting the voices of the oppressed group in a male-dominated society through a specific feminist trend and terminology. Thus, the significance of the present research lies in its innovativeness and its uniqueness; filling the already mentioned gap in the criticism of Rich's works, this study will focus on these aspects of Rich's poetics and will analyze it in terms of Showalter's specific feminist theories and terminologies.

## **1. 3. The Objective of the Study**

Showalter believes that American women's works has "a shape, a history, a process of evolution that can be traced over time" ("American Gynocriticism" 112) The main objective of this study is to find the traces of the development of Rich's feminist poetics and reflection of the suppressed voices of women articulated in this poet's works. Therefore, this study is an attempt to shed light on the process of Rich's poetic development in different phases of her literary career beginning from a poet who, in a conservative manner, uses male aesthetics to reflect her ideas, to a radical feminist writer who, turning against her former male aestheticism, freely gives voice to her feminist ideas and to the voices of the oppressed women from different areas of experience, including such famous women as Marie Curie, Emily Dickinson and many other women even anonymous women who were wiped out of the history, and finally to a poet who turns totally to female aestheticism, instead of merely guarding against male aestheticism, in attempt to create a purely feminine art.

Showalter, through whose theories this thesis is shaped, enlightens the necessity for such an approach in looking at women's literature. She believes that the prerequisite to understanding women's literature, its specialty, and difference, is "to reconstruct its past, to rediscover the scores of women novelists, poets and

dramatists whose work has been obscured by time and to establish the continuity of female tradition from decade to decade." Through this method, Showalter argues, we can trace the patterns and phases of the evolution of the female tradition, which is parallel to the phases of the development of any "subcultural art," through which we can "challenge the periodicity of orthodox literary history, and its enshrined canons of achievement" ("Feminist Poetics" 35). This is what this thesis intends to do by originating the reason for Rich's, as a female writer's, preferences in displaying a special trend and attitude in different phases of her literary career and thus tracing her literary development from one phase to the other in the ruling orthodox tradition and her rebellion against such tradition with her development. This thesis, therefore, is an attempt to illustrate the female literary tradition in the works of Rich from her beginning steps of trying her hands in writing up to the present day and, to use Showalter's words, "to show how the development of this tradition is similar to the development of any literary subculture." As Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own*, (hence *ALTO*), notes, such a systematic exploration of women's writing enlightens one's awareness of political, social, and cultural experiences of women. (8-11)

#### **1. 4. Literature Review**

As the purpose of the study requires knowledge of Rich's main female themes and her feminist practices in different steps of her poetic career, a review of the following books and articles was considered to be useful in the process:

Believing that Rich's poetry reflects America's public voice and records what is real and tangible in American culture and politics and at the same time surveys the "public space," Langdell in *The Moment of Change* (2004) focuses on the manner in which Rich accomplishes such a mission. She notes that Rich's poetry assesses the "political tempo of her time [... and] embodies the American zeitgeist, particularly as it impacts American women and political culture." Therefore, this book, Langdell clarifies, helps those who want to understand Rich's works in the light of "life, poetry, gender, and the body as they relate to the American body politic" (1).

Focusing on Rich's prose works, and with some references to her poems where Rich's political ideas find their first expression, *Adrienne Rich: Passion, Politics, and the Body* (1997) elaborates on Rich's controversial contributions to feminism with regard to women's experiences, her "provocative definitions of lesbian identity" and her decisive challenges to different sorts of institutions such as motherhood and sexual otherness through which women have been oppressed all over the history. (Yorke 1)

Krista Ratcliffe devotes one chapter of her book named as *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions: Virginia Woolf, Nary Daly, Adrienne Rich* (1996) to feminist challenges in the works of Adrienne Rich suggesting the idea that patriarchal structure affects women's rhetoric as well as the themes of their writing. She is against the idea that traditional rhetoric is gender-blinded and tries to prove this idea by focusing on some of Rich's bulk of writing in which Ratcliffe tries to explore the "connections between language, textuality, particular women, and culture(s)" and the subjectivity of women brought about by this gendered rhetoric and language. (109)

*The Dream and the Dialogue* (1994) written by Alice Templeton focuses on Adrienne Rich's feminist aesthetics in such works as *Diving*, *The Dream of a Common Language*, and *A Wild Patience*. Believing that Rich's poetry negotiated "feminist poetics" especially from 1970s onwards, Templeton tries to find traces of such a feminist consciousness across her poetic career after 1970s, that is, after the publication of *Diving*, which is known as Rich's first radical feminist collection of poetry. (8)

*Adrienne Rich's Prose and Poetry*, by Barbara and Albert Gelpi (1993), is a collection of Adrienne Rich's prose and poetry up to her *An Atlas of the Difficult World* along with a series of critical essays, published on Rich's literary works, which trace her feminist commitment as well as formalism in her different works. The combination of the selection of Rich's works and critical essays written on them, articles by such feminist critics as Judith McDaniel, Adrian Oktenberg, Olga Broumas, and Margaret Atwood, "give a long overdue compilation of Rich's work and a chart to her poetic journey" (xi).



In *My Life a Loaded Gun: Dickinson, Plath, Rich, and Female Creativity* (1990), as the name suggests, Bennett sets to explicate the works of Dickinson, Plath and Rich respectively. Noting that though there were poets before these three who sought to make womanhood as a creative source of power in their art, none were "so devastatingly honest" in their works as these three poets. Thus, this book, focusing specifically on the works of these three female authors as the foremothers of today's women poets, expounds the way that these writers putting their "self-alienating masks" aside learned disclose the explosive rage which they found in their "'depths, [their] dark places,' the power that made them whole" (11).

Having two kinds of audience in mind, first those who are nonspecialists in Rich's works and second the feminist audiences who are already familiar with Rich's underlying commitment to "political and aesthetic [...] transformation," Werner in *Adrienne Rich: The Poet and Her Critics* (1988), taking a systematic view of criticism, tries to write a "reference book" to introduce Rich's basic concerns by positing them "in the context of an ongoing debate." Therefore, the book starts with giving a shape of Rich's literary career and then goes to give an account of her revisionist attitudes, her radical ideas and her lesbian vision. (viii)

*Aesthetics of Power* (1986) written by Claire Keyes is a critical analysis of Rich's poetry from *A Change of World* to *A Wild Patience* in terms of different American feminist concepts. The book expounds Rich's female aesthetics and her dilemma of power as both a poet and a woman concluding that Rich finally succeeds to conceptualize a "beneficent female power- both personal and political- predicated upon her own experience as woman and poet" (4).

*Translating Poetic Discourse: Questions on Feminist Strategies in Adrienne Rich* (1985) written by Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, a Chilean poet and translator of Rich's works, explains Rich's feminist discourse by focusing, as a translator and a literary critic, on "ideological and linguistic" difficulties of translating Rich's poems into Spanish. Through this study Diaz-Diocaretz tries to draw the conclusion that Rich's linguistic strategies, besides her themes, set on to challenge the already established patriarchal cultural assumptions. (Templeton, "Contradictions" 336)

In another book entitled as *The Transforming Power of Language* (1984) Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, focusing on Rich's feminist poetics, analyzes this poet's outstanding "author position" and her constant allusion to different texts, from Susan B. Anthony's diaries to Arnold's "Culture and Anarchy." Diaz-Diocaretz makes her feminist study more suggestive and comprehensive by analyzing these ideas in the light of Foucault's idea of "author-function" and Kristeva's "intertextuality." Therefore, this feminist analysis of Rich's works is devoted to such books as *Twenty-One Love Poems*, considered as Rich's subversion of traditional love sonnets, and *Snapshots*, as a reflection of the poet's sense of "cultural betrayal" throughout history. (Templeton, "Contradictions" 335-6)

In *American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich* (1984) in a triad framework considering the outstanding American women writers and their contribution to American literature and their status in literature of their country, Wendy Martin devotes one part of her book to analyzing Adrienne Rich's poetry as a feminist writer obsessed with the idea of necessity of creation of a "community of women" to revolt against acceptance of traditional roles imposed on women in a patriarchal society. (169)

Jane Roberta Cooper in her *Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-Visions* (1984) collects a series of feminist reviews and articles on Rich's prose and poetry, written mostly by female critics, which reflects on the terms Rich focuses in her writings including women's history, the role of language as both a liberating and a restricting cultural phenomenon, and poet's engagement in a radical feminist discourse. These articles, chosen mainly for their historical value, document Rich's reception by readers and critics. The poetry reviews, chosen from those written before *Diving* to those written after *Diving*, reflect Rich from "the blind spots of masculine literary culture" to the explosive power of her writings. Taken together, these reviews and articles reveal "differences between feminist and patriarchal understandings" of Rich's works. (iv)

*Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery* (1977) focusing on the works of these five poets reflects the autobiographical impulses of these poets' works, that is, the ways that these contemporary American poets describe and dramatize their lives in their literary

works. Kalstone points that the poets who came after 1945 were taught, like Yeats' pupils, to be neat in one way or another but little by little they discover their own genuine literary impulses. Hence, this book seeks to analyze these poets' ongoing literary process to show "how poetry can serve as autobiography [reflecting ...] the revisions of the self that come through writing verse" (3-11).

Sharmila in "Voices of Dissent: Women and Marriage in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, Adrienne Rich" (1991) concentrates on the concept of marriage and wifehood in three American female poets, including Rich. Through an "exploration of socially constructed hierarchy," especially in poems about marriage, Sharmila undergoes a project of analyzing these three poets' "subversive art" in their struggle to "recover a woman's place in society" (iv).

Joshua Samuel Jacobs in his "Towards an Ethics of Location: Witnessing Community in Adrienne Rich's Poetry" (1997) focuses on Adrienne Rich's revision of her idea with regard to feminist community since 1980, a change which comes to include women from different experiences across diverse countries and societies in an ideal female community. He does this in the light of the "ethical philosophy" of such philosophers as Emmanuel Levinas. (4)

Wasley in his "Postmodern American Poetry and the Legacy of Auden" (2000) undertakes a huge project of investigating the literary influence of Auden on postmodern American poetry including poetry of Adrienne Rich for whom he devote one entire chapter. Beginning with her first volume of poetry, *A Change of World*, Wasley traces the influence of Auden as a male poet and educator, under whose influence Rich began reading and writing academically and professionally, from the very beginning of her writing and then goes to her other writings, written at a time when she was considered as a mature poet with quite different theories of writing. Wasley believes that even in this period of her writing the influence of such male masters as Auden can be felt in her writing: "Rich's own mature poetic practice reveals her inheritance" (179).

In her "Adrienne Rich, Location and the body," (2000) Mary Eagleton starting with Rich's concern with the difficulty of choice between pronouns "I" and "we" or even the use of "she" instead of either of these two, undertakes to offer a new reading of the concept of "locatedness" focusing "location of the body and [...]"

Rich's exploration of the body, *her* body, as female, as white, as Jewish and as a body in a nation." She examines the importance of race, sex and national identity for Rich reflected in her writing through her use of individual and collective pronouns, "I" and "we" (310).

### **1. 5. Methodology**

This is a library research. The methodology used in this study would be feminism. Feminism, as a critical approach, is not limited to only one feminism but is composed of different feminisms and Rich's poetry lends itself to a collective of feminist approaches. However, in this broad field of literary criticism this thesis will focus specifically on Showalter's, as a feminist critic's, critical theories and terminologies, including her theory of the three phases of female literary development along with her idea of gynocriticism, to draw the main point home.

Based on Showalter, a "reliable feminist criticism" would give an account of women's writing in relation to real society and their lived experience. ("Literary Criticism" 436-7) Hence, she asserts that in looking through the literary subcultures, one can see that they go through three major phases of development altogether: the first phase, the *Feminine* phase, includes an internalization of the standards of the dominant culture and "*imitation*" of its established modes (of writing and behavior); the next phase, that is, the *Feminist* phase, as a reaction to the first one, is a phase of "*protest*;" it is the period of objection against all the standards which the female writers were expected to follow and the period of advocacy and promotion of the rights and values of the minority, "including a demand for autonomy;" finally, the last one, the *Female* phase, is the phase of "*self-discovery*," a turn toward the female aesthetics and an autonomous self freed from the restraint of opposition. Nevertheless, Showalter emphasizes that these phases are not rigid ones and, therefore, they may overlap; furthermore, she notes, all these three phases, undergone sometimes by a whole generation might be found in one single author, (*ALTO* 12-13) as it is supposed in this thesis to be the case with Rich.

As for gynocriticism, Showalter develops a new model of feminist criticism