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Towards a “Womyn’s” Land: Adrienne Rich’s “Twenty One Love Poems” as a Clarion Call for a Lesbian Order and Idiom

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Adrienne Rich is the voice of dissent in American Literature and also the most influential of writers in the twentieth century. Her oeuvre constitutes, what can be termed, the poetics of democracy. A feminist, social activist, and leftist, she endeavoured to write poetry that would catalyze social change. She was a crusader, boldly challenging oppressive forces that exploited nations, races, women, proletariats, homosexuals, and even nature. Her open acknowledgement of being a lesbian and her polemical attack on compulsory heterosexuality established Adrienne Rich as a force to reckon with in the feminist pantheon. “Twenty One Love Poems” which appeared in her collection *The Dream of a Common Language* speaks about the power of love felt by women for one another and the exclusively female experience of lesbian sexuality. It indicts “the denial of reality and visibility to women’s passion for women, women’s choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation” (Rich 54). Rejecting the patriarchal order that threatens women and children, she hopes to bring about a change by recognizing the beneficent female principle. Simultaneously, the poem establishes the genesis of a lesbian/feminist idiom that is free from the sexist and limiting influence of a masculine language which pushes women to the periphery of serious concerns of life.

Born in 1929 into a highly respectable family of professionals, Adrienne Cecile Rich was every bit the ideal girl whose profile satisfied the rightists. She shouldered the prodigious aspirations of her father, dabbled in the most traditional verse that echoed male masters, married an academician who sympathetically let her indulge the luxury of writing and mothered three children. However, her persona and artistic career underwent a radical transition by the 1960s with the publication of her third collection *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), an epiphanic work in which she recognized female marginalization and the link between gender, and social and economic reality. It was also a channel for venting her smoldering anger regarding “questions of identity, sacrifice, ego, creation, ambition” (Singh 141).

Her involvement in anti-war, civil rights, and feminist activism and protest against the Vietnam-America war accentuated her position as a non-conformist. Fearless and incisive, her work lashed out against the myriad forms of discrimination that existed in a patriarchal, racist, capitalist society. A fierce critic of the acquisitive and sexist American attitude, she condemned Reaganomics and tokenism. However, she has been most vocal regarding the marginalization of the LGBT community. *The Will to Change* (1971), which coincided with the end of her marriage, confirmed the synthesis of her poetics of transgression. What followed were prose and poetic works that articulated the need for a more humane and inclusive social order that would afford people the “happiness of true participation in society” as recorded in her June 1999

interview with Michael Klein published in the *Boston Phoenix* (Singh 136). She challenged hegemony in all forms, especially the ones originating from male subjectivity in *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), and *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (1979).

Perhaps, her most controversial essay is “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980). One of the first to speak out on the theme of lesbian relationships, the essay exposes “how and why women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community, has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise; and ... the virtual or total neglect of lesbian existence in a wide range of writings, including feminist scholarship” (Rich 13). Preferring to use the terms ‘lesbian existence’ and ‘lesbian continuum’ in place of the clinical and limiting ‘lesbianism’, she challenges institutionalized heterosexuality that is venerated as ‘normal’ and threatens women into leading double lives.

With subsequent publications like *A Wild Patience has Taken Me This Far* (1981) and *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (1983), she established herself as an artist with an “oppositional imagination” and a voice that does not speak the official language. With each volume, she enacted her vision to connect the personal and the political in order to create a world beyond divisive polarities.

Herself a lesbian, her partnership with Michelle Cliff, the Jamaican writer was soon followed by the pamphlet “Twenty One Love Poems” in 1977 which formed part of her collection *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978). Loosely modeled on the sonnet, this sequence of twenty one poems along with an unnumbered “Floating Poem” is the first overt testament of lesbian desire and sexuality. It sparkles with Rich’s unparalleled genius, courage and conviction in her poetic art and sexual identity. “Twenty One Love Poems” traces the trajectory of a lesbian relationship that begins with passionate and complete companionship but eventually disintegrates due to the pressure of homophobic cultural forces that act within and against the women. But, by then, “the two lovers of one gender” have already ushered in a new order, an apocalypse that replaces the “half-world” with one based on the female principle, where patriarchal values and blue prints are discarded.

The poem is an open acknowledgement of Rich’s own sexual orientation after she walked out of her heterosexual marriage and “institutionalized motherhood” and moved in with her lesbian partner Michelle Cliff. Rich, fiercely and with remarkable conviction, advocates the lesbians’ need to ‘come out of the closet’ and walk through the city of Manhattan, the microcosm of the patriarchal world which according to Susan Friedman represents “a violent world which the lovers must inhabit, yet seek to transform with love and relationship” (Nelson). They must brave all odds to survive in a homophobic society and live like resilient “sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air” (I).

Besides an assertion of the need for homosexual communities to move out of their enclosures, the poem also concerns itself with the creation of a feminist, lesbian order and idiom. When language itself conspires against female experience owing to its phallogocentrism, the poem exhorts women to counter such inadequacies by appropriating the power of naming. In the early years of her writing career, she herself had imitated the poetics of Yeats and Auden. But, “she was soon to discard this early formalism in favour of a more personal idiom, which enabled

her to identify with and reach out to millions of women who shared her plight, investing thereby, a new confidence in the personal as political” (Singh 138).

As Rich herself states, “Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language” (Nelson). Hence, lesbian separatists in America have rejected the term ‘woman’, which is a mere derivative of ‘man’, and instead prefer to create ‘womyn’s lands’. This politics of renaming becomes a central preoccupation of the love poems, an agenda already vouched by Rich in her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1972).

In the words of Joanne Feit Diehl, “the female poet, like Adam in the Garden, can name rather than rename the world around her. This transference foremost allows the woman to be both subject and object of consciousness, the agent of desire and its aim” (Nelson). Rich asserts and acknowledges the difficulties experienced by female creativity that is forced to function within the framework of male authorship and phallogocentrism. The “rick and pincers held in readiness” gag their voices, burying them in the “desert sand” (V) of an impotent, inadequate, sexist language. The end result is the silence,

of artists dying in childbirth, wise-women charred at the stake,
Centuries of books unwritten piled behind these shelves;
and we still have to stare into absence
of men who would not, women who could not, speak
to our life... (V)

Rich commences the mythopoetic enterprise of carving out an exclusively gynocentric culture, a world without men and male language. However, the attempt to convert the personal and intimate experience of a lesbian relationship into the basis for creating a radically alternative poetics, or rather merging the personal and the political is challenging in itself. During a brief phase of uncertainty, self-doubt and reflection, she realizes the true purpose of the agenda – the need to atone for past evasions, “the failure to want our own freedom passionately enough”, the “desecration of ourselves” (VII) and the “temptation to make a career of pain” (VIII).

The first step towards the genesis of a new idiom that would translate the other “half-world” (V), the “inarticulate life” (IX) is the confession of lesbian identity in a world where “lesbians are projected as victims of misandry, misogamy and “phallic envy”, while lesbianism is seen as the enactment of women’s bitterness against men” (Singh 153). Compulsory heterosexuality, according to Rich, is a “lie” foisted on women “to keep her separate from her sisters, keep her from giving primacy to anything other than men and family” (Singh 153). Hence, nobody conceived of the possibility of female love and bonding – “No one has imagined us” (I). In the words of Gertrude Hughes, “by not officially existing, women who love women – whether as mothers and daughters, as sisters, as lesbians, or as colleagues and friends – have to struggle even to believe in the existence of their own love, let alone to live that love” (Nelson).

When the narrator of the poem declares, “we are two lovers of one gender/ we are two women of one generation” (XII), she unravels new possibilities of the woman identified experience which is “a source of power and liberation” (Singh 155) and the “range of knowing and identification that seems most possible in same-sex love” (Nelson). This bold step forward marks the beginning of the apocalypse in the patriarchal world of violence, pornography, gynophobia and vilification of the “Other”. In the new ‘womyn’s land’, old rules “break like a

thermometer” (XIII) and there is no language, no law debilitating them. The unexplored female landscape is inhabited by “women outside the law” (XIII) and in the absence of a precedent, everything they do is “pure invention” (XIII). If the privilege was assigned to Adam in the Genesis story, here the woman is entitled to the right of naming this new world.

Along the lines of *écriture féminine* introduced by Hélène Cixous in her seminal essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Rich engages in the act of writing the body. According to Cixous, “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies... Woman must put herself into the text ...” (Nelson). This is one way to counter the definitions and expectations imposed on femininity and the experience of female sexuality by male narratives. It is, in itself, an act of re-visioning the old texts. Poem XI and the Floating Poem are instances of *écriture féminine* which analogize the female body and nature. The first draws a vivid image of the narrator’s desire to travel with her lesbian partner to the peak of every sacred mountain, to the volcanoes with the searing lava inside them and to lovingly name the “nameless” “jewel-like flower” growing on the “slowly altering rock”. Jane Vanderbosck observes:

Poem XI of “Twenty One Love Poems”, presents the female landscape in miniature. She is both the “volcano” and the women who “scale the path.” The “jewel-like flower” that grows on the side of the mountain has a physical corollary in the clitoris. Again, the female is not one thing anymore than it is one place. It is everywhere, any place that women perceive to be “eternally and visibly female.” Existing on the land and in the body, it is both Nature and Woman.

[...] Like the sibyls of ancient Greece, these women prophesy a mysterious vision that is not of this world. In the case of these modern sibyls, the vision is an exclusively female one which they (rather than the male priests of the Greek sanctuaries) interpret by the act of naming. (Nelson)

“The Floating Poem, Unnumbered”, Rich’s most erotic poem, exudes with sexual energy and is the unadulterated narrative of the experience of consummation from a female perspective. It is as much within and outside the sequence since it is numberless. The poem therefore, refutes any attempt at structuring and can be read at any point in the sequence. This in itself is an enactment of the lesbian’s refusal to be shackled in the Procrustes’ Bed of patriarchal incarceration. The use of nature imagery to describe female anatomy is yet again evocative and offers fresh perspective:

... Your body
will haunt mine – tender, delicate
your lovemaking, like the half-curved frond
of the fiddlehead fern in forests
just washed by sun.

Mary J Carruthers believes, “this is a vision of social and moral renewal, not of orgasmic transcendence, and it indicates the precise relationship for Rich between the bonding of women and social transformation. The lesbian love bespeaks a new moral, social order...” (Nelson).

This world that belongs only to the Adams and spurns the Eves is inimical not only to female bonding but to bonding of any sort and hence here “two people together is a miracle” (XVIII) “a work/ heroic in its ordinariness” (XIX). It is therefore imperative that it is replaced by a healthier order fashioned by the female. Since “there are no miracles” (XIX) the relationship between the women also breaks but it brings the narrator closer to her own selfhood and power. Once the “adhesion” is pulled off, she wills herself to look into the present and not brood over the past as she asserts: “I mean to go on living” (XIX). The speaker feels a sense of estrangement which is compared to “dawn pushing toward daybreak” (XVIII), and hence laced with the conviction that it portends a deeper awareness. The “cleft of light - ?” she glimpses faintly, and wonders about in Poem XVIII, is the harbinger of this epiphany. She discovers that the woman she thought she had been conversing with all this while, trying to unearth her deepest fears and repressions, was her own inner self – “I was talking to my own soul” (XX). The ‘woman-identified-woman’, in the process of healing the other’s pain encounters her own and discovers herself.

The “cleft of light” brightens and reveals a mythical landscape placed beyond history and civilization. The setting is reminiscent of the Stonehenge but is interpreted as the mindscape. This prehistoric monument in Wiltshire, England defies explanation and its purpose and origin still remain shrouded in mystery. The ring of blue, foreign megaliths dating back to 3000 BCE is variously described as burial ground, healing site and ritual plot. Claire Keyes observes, “What matters here is that the speaker responds to its spiritual resonances and its connection to the moon” (Nelson). Flooded by “the midsummer night light rising from beneath/ the horizon” (XXI), the place is suggestive of the womb and the moonlight dispels the presence of the Sun, usually representative of male power.

She has traversed a difficult and painful journey to finally arrive at the center of her own womanliness. Thus, the love for the lesbian partner is replaced by an even more meaningful and empowering love for her own womanhood. And here, she chooses to define her own sphere of action – “I choose to be the figure in that light” (XXI).” This core of the female world is what she embraces as the altar where she will begin the ritual of translating the invisible half-world through poetry. She initiates the regeneration of the distorted world, the beginning of civilization all over again – “I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle.” According to Keyes,

In this space, Rich’s persona assumes the role of high priestess. She seeks out “that light” and performs her rituals [...] She may part from her beloved, but her connection to the universe and to womanliness is forged by her commitment to the spirit of poetry, which is ‘the drive to connect’. (Nelson)

Even more than a decade since the dawn of the twenty first century, it is legitimate to say that some of the taboos and paranoia regarding same-sex love have been lifted with a few countries even offering legal sanction to same-sex marriages. But there is still rampant legal and social conservatism and hypocrisy that exclude homosexual communities from the mainstream and deny equality. In this context “Twenty Love Poems” is a tour de force of the Other’s need for recognition and inclusion. “They break the silences that smother lesbian sexuality, relationships and identity and resist thereby, a co-optation into the heterosexual system that they challenge. These poems reflect a strong desire to break free of a public history that ascribes lesbian deviance” (Singh 156).

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