

Re-Writing the Feminine Myth in Adrienne Rich's

I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus

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Abstract

Feminist writers always work on representing women in literature positively through rewriting her history and her role in the society. They intend to liberate her from the constraints of patriarchal myths and history which confined her image to passivity and weakness. As a feminist poet, Adrienne Rich uses her poetry to empower woman's status by exploring the influence of the patriarchal language and history which contributes to undermine woman's position in the society. She used her feminine discourse to deconstruct the patriarchal myths and to re-write them again in order to inscribe women's names in these myths as an equivalent power to the power of males. Thus, the present study aims to investigate Rich's discourse of re-writing mythology in her poem, *I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus*. The study approaches her discourse of female difference in language in light of Helene Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine*. The study concludes that woman's different use of language in light of Cixous's concept can be a vital strategy of empowering women rather than weakening and inferiorizing them.

Keywords: Adrienne Rich, Helene Cixous, feminine writing, patriarchal myths.

Introduction

Adrienne Rich, a prominent American poet, was born in Baltimore, Maryland on 16th of May 1929. She is one of the most powerful feminist voices who dares to challenge the patriarchal assumptions in her poetry during the second stage of Women's Liberation Movements. Her poetry intends to strengthen women's position and to weaken the oppressive male. In her early stage of writing, Rich wrote according to the patriarchal roles which require the poet not to enclose reference to the social, political, historical context and to follow the great males' mode of writings. Rich's father has a great influence on her earlier writings, which led her first collection of poetry *A Change of world* (1951) to be written in a formal objective style and expressed universal ideas. In her early stage, she was imitative of the common discourse of writing shaped mostly by T. S. Eliot and his contemporaries; a discourse utilizes the Greek mythology to serve man's needs and desires at the expense of woman's ones. However, revitalizing the myths about women to be sources of empowerment is overlooked by female writers. As such, Rich took the mission to look differently to the mythical representation of women through re-visiting them to clear away every passive implication associated with the female character.

At the age of thirty, Rich experienced inner struggling to handle her life as a woman poet with family and three children. At this period, she gave birth to her third collection of poems *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* after eight years of silence. Jeanette E. Riley explains that the conflict between motherhood and authorship caused certain pain to Rich, yet it also created the breakthrough poems in Rich's third collection (2004). After the publication of *Snapshots*, Rich joined the Women's Liberation Movement

which has a great impact on her poetry. In her collection of poems *The Will to Change* (1971), Rich's arrived to a stage she had wished to accomplish in *Snapshots*. She transformed from obedient housewife to a feminist activist who calls for women's rights and challenges the patriarchal assumptions and Western narratives in order to deconstruct these biased narratives and reconstruct new ones. Rich seeks "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" (Showalter, 1979, 35).

In her groundbreaking essay *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision* (1972), Rich described women's struggle as to be awakened from a long sleeping and to take a step further in making a change. She mentioned that Western culture which is controlled by male language and thoughts created a problem for female writers to find the source of their energy. She illustrated that men betrayed women by language, she herself was one of them when she followed their rules at the beginning of her career. A change for the old rules is essential for Rich, she says in this regard:

a change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order re-assert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (1972, 18-19).

Sheena J. Vachhani conducted a study under the title *Rethinking the Politics of Writing Differently Through Écriture Féminine*. The article examines the way *Écriture Féminine* embodied writing in management and organization studies. It explores the intersection between language, sexual difference and

writing from the body. The study examines the intersection of sex/text used by the two French feminists Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous with their two modes of feminine writing and their ways of decentering the conventional types of writing. Vachhani concludes that writing differently which is used by feminist writers based on French feminist theories of *Écriture Féminine* exposed the effect of masculine singularity in writing and how it suppressed and concealed the possibilities for effective feminine writing. Yet, it offers opportunities for feminist writers to have their own space and to create effective feminist voices in language (2019).

Rich's volume *The Will to Change* signaled the change in her poetic career which reached its peak in her next stage *Diving into the Wreck*. *The Will to Change* witnessed her personal involvement in gender related issues. According to Greene, woman searches for "freedom from conventional roles, looks to her past for answers about the present, speculates about the cultural and literary tradition that has formed her, and seeks a plot different from the marriage or death that are her customary ends" (1990, 166). During the seventies, Rich was able to write about her experience as a woman for the first time. She was not afraid to expose herself as a female poet and she was ready to engage in a quest in her poetry, a quest beyond myths and legends, to reveal the truth about man and woman about 'You' and 'I'.

Discussion

I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus was a poem collected in Rich's *The Will to Change* which marked her departure from the masculine realm that limited her power and imprisoned her words within the rigid rules of patriarchy, into a feminine world which liberated her words and identified

herself within the masculine realm. Rich In *I Dream* used the myth of Orpheus with a modernizing shape. Her feminist voice is obvious in this poem. Keyes stated that "Rich's poem *I Dream* is overtly feminist and carries forth her theme of the 'Reconstruction of the mind' (1986, 120). In this poem, Rich tries to deconstruct the myth of Orpheus in order to fit her feminist purposes. In the Greek myth, Orpheus was a poet-singer who suffered from the loss of his beloved wife Eurydice a short time after their wedding. Orpheus travelled to the underworld hoping to revive his deceased beloved wife from the clutches of death, the realm of Hades. Orpheus endeavored a heroic journey to walk through the fiery underworld in order to meet its deities, Pluto and Proserpine to beg them to take back his beloved wife Eurydice to the living world. Pluto and Proserpine accepted his plea on condition that his wife walked behind him and he never looked back to her until they reached the living world. Orpheus could not control his fear, he turned around and his wife swept back to the underworld. In this myth, there are two worlds, the world of conscious, activeness, the living world, this world is represented by the hero male Orpheus, while the other world is the distant world, the underworld, the world of the unconscious where his wife Eurydice resides (Daly & Rengel, 2009, 107).

Rich in this poem incorporated the myth with the unconscious in order to deconstruct the patriarchal myth with a new form, a new feminine style, stems from the unconscious mind. Looking from the perspective of Cixous's *écriture féminine*, she encouraged women writers to use their imagination, their unconscious because "Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible" (1976, 876). Through *écriture féminine*, Rich rediscovered the female experience, female power and this is manifested in the use of her feminine language. Cixous

mentioned that, "Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement" (1976, 875).

Rich transformed the myth of Orpheus to put it in a more feminist perspective. She starts her own quest by these lines:

I am walking rapidly through striations of light
and dark thrown under an arcade.
I am a woman in the prime of life, with certain
powers
and those powers severely limited
by authorities whose faces I rarely see. (1-4)

Rich is aware of her 'rapid' change, she is fully mature of the complexities of her mind and body in her changing world, of breaking from the old patriarchal rules, and distancing herself from the 'light' side, the paternal world, the conscious symbolic world with its rigid forms, to the 'dark' side, the pre-symbolic side, the unconscious world, the maternal world in a quest to find her feminine voice. Rich used the word 'life' to link it with the word 'woman' to contrast the patriarchal image which attached woman with the image of death. The poem's persona is a young woman and not an aged woman, she is 'a woman in the prime of life', she is still young and can provide more lives because woman is the life-giver. Yet, as a woman, although she is the life-giver and has 'certain powers', to challenge, to compete, but her 'powers are severely limited by authorities'. Just like Orpheus in the myth who has been ordered to behave according to god's rules. Rich's heroic female protagonist has limited power due to the males' 'authorities'. Rich accused the males' 'authorities' of limiting woman's power, woman's creativity with their strict rules, with their phallogocentric language, and despite their 'faces' she 'rarely see' but she experienced their injustice through forcing her to imitate their own language.

Therefore, Language has the power to determine the personal identity and to limit this identity. Cixous in *The Newly Born Woman* urges women to find their own path, their own feminine language, to write and to avoid all the obstacles that stand in their way, history, origin, sex, fatherland and to "relinquishing the old structures, and risking the unknown, 'seek out the shattered, the multiple 'I' to 'emerge from the one self, shed the old body, shake off the Law?" (Sellers, 1991, 141). As the language became an instrument for males' domination, Rich endured a risky mission to deconstruct the "discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system" (Cixous, 1975, 353). Thus, Rich in *I Dream* intends to bring the male's myths and to stand against the orthodox literary masculine traditions in order to create new female myth, a female mode of expression to shake the Law of the Father.

I am a woman in the prime of life
driving her dead poet in a black Rolls-Royce
through a landscape of twilight and thorns.
A woman with a certain mission
which if obeyed to the letter will leave her intact. (5-9)

Rich's heroic protagonist who is 'a woman in the prime of life' afforded the heroic journey to save her 'dead poet' with a modernist tool with 'a black Rolls-Royce'. Rich used the myth of Orpheus and deconstructed it by displaying the female figure as having the male's power, the one who tolerated a quest to save her dead poet, her animus side. She did that in a very modern tool, a new language, a feminine language, a language stems from a female figure who once as Cixous mentioned was labeled as 'black' territory. Women have been "taught that their territory is black: [...], you are black" (1976, 877). Rich wants to use her feminine language to revive her

animus side, the other in her, to find the reconciliation between the body and mind. Cixous states that woman admits the Other in her, woman has not erased the Other in her, and she let the Other comes through her. According to this notion, Cixous says that the feminine writing represents:

the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me – the other that I am and am not, that I don't know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live – that tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me, who? – a feminine one, a masculine one, some?– several, some unknown, which is indeed what gives me the desire to know and from which all life soars. This peopling gives neither rest nor security, always disturbs the relationship to 'reality', produces an uncertainty that gets in the way of the subject's socialization. It is distressing, it wears you out; and for men, this permeability, this non exclusion is a threat, something intolerable. (Cixous, 1986, 583)

Thus, as the agent of change, the 'instrument' of change, Rich's persona in the poem accepts all the difficulties she will face in her way to pass 'through a landscape' full of 'thorns' in order to complete her 'mission'. Regarding Rich's mission, Albert Gelpi points out in his article *Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change* that "Adrienne Rich's mission is to live out her dream of a society of individual men and women. By challenging us to a more honest realization, [...] as the mirror of their consciousness and the medium of their transformation" (1993, 147). Rich's heroic female needs to listen to the past angels' voices she heard once who "chiding" (Snapshots) her and asked her to revolt, to obey the message 'the letter' which is sent to her from her suffering psyche, to find her own path and to distance herself from the dominated patriarchal discourse which confined her creativity with its strict rules. If she

would have 'obeyed' that voice right from the beginning, she would not be suffering up to the current moment and she would have experienced her full power by now. The speaker urges women not to waste their times, to take advantage from the other past experiences, and to value their power when they are "in the prime of life". They do not need to wait until their "mind [...], moldering like wedding-cake/ heavy with useless experience" (Snapshots). The speaker in *I Dream* is more conscious about her power and more determinant to act accordingly.

A woman with the nerves of a panther
a woman with contacts among Hell's Angels
a woman feeling the fullness of her powers
at the precise moment when she must not use them (10-13)

Rich through her quest to unify her split self, the 'anima' and animus' sides of her soul, experienced change. No more passivity or silence, she is 'a woman', yet she has 'nerves of a panther'. In her essay, *When We Dead Awaken*, Rich talks about how to grow up in a male dominated society, to live under their conditions and to accept their rules and definitions. Later on, Rich becomes aware of her split inner self, between the girl who defined herself according to her relationships with men and the girl who writes the poems and defines herself through writing (1972). Rich learns the craft of writing from the males' 'authorities'. At that time, she had to write according to those 'authorities' expectations, according to what she had been taught that poetry should be 'universal'. That phase was ended, when she was forced to neglect her female identity and imitated the great male writers. By now, she is not afraid to express her personal female experience, to expose her true identity because Rich's persona is not passive or weak, she has 'the nerves of a panther', to attack, to challenge and not to be a prey. Rich's choice of using

the image of the 'Panther' to compare it with the female protagonist is not arbitrary. The panther symbolizes the courage, the challenge, the feminine power, and the rites to pass to the other world which is blessed by the ancient maternal lunar power (Faithful, 2018). Moreover, the panther is black which links his image with the image of the 'black Rolls-Royce'. Both images represent the heroic female means of transportation to the other world, to the dark side, to the unconscious world. There, the female persona will find her strength; her feminine power. She will feel 'the fullness of her power'. She will find her feminine language when she re-contacts with the maternal body, the other inside her, the outlaws, the 'Hell's angels' who have been casted away from the males' heaven, and from the Law of the Father.

Rich asserts that "women's physicality as a resource rather than a destiny" (1986, 188). Therefore, while the phallus is the masculine metaphor in phallogocentric language according to Freud and Lacan theories, the feminine body is the source of meaning and language according to *écriture féminine*. Hence, Rich asserts the word 'woman' in the poem *I Dream* to mention it seven times, and whenever she mentioned the word 'woman', she asserts to link the word with positive images like 'life', 'panther', 'lucidity', 'power' to deconstruct the bad images which were imposed on women according to patriarchal myths. Rich rediscovers the female experiences through exploring woman's sexual differences as a source of power rather to a source of inferiority. Rich states in this regard:

To write directly and overtly as woman, out of a woman's body and experience, to take woman's experience seriously, as theme and source of art, was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my writing life. It placed me nakedly face to face with both terror and anger; it

did indeed imply the breakdown of the world as I have always known it, the end of safety... but it realized tremendous energy in me, and in many other women, to have that way of writing affirmed and validated in a growing political community. I felt for the first time the closing gap between the poet and the woman. (1983, 526)

In order to subvert the phallogocentric structure of discourse, Rich tries to create a feminine discourse which stems from her feminine body by allowing the birth of the Other within her and to close the gap between the woman and the poet. Werner mentions that:

During the late 1960s, Rich came to see the language encoding the patriarchal perspective as the crucial link between the personal and political dimensions of her experience. As a result, she turned her attention to the problem of articulation an alternative vision in a patriarchal language designed to obscure relationships and fix boundaries. (1988, 64-65)

Poetry for Rich means the space where she can find freedom and speak truth. It represents her means of transformation to survive. Poetic language for Rich is linked with her marginal status as a woman. Rich searches for new poetic language, a new feminine language to articulate the pains she faced as a woman in her earlier career. Poetry for Rich is the space where she can find truth. Rich assures through her heroic female that she 'sworn to lucidity', no more hiding behind a mask, or trying to be another person to please the 'authorities'. No more hiding the truth because she 'sees through the mayhem, the smoky fires', and the 'smoke' finally starts to clear.

a woman sworn to lucidity
who sees through the mayhem, the smoky fires
of these underground streets

her dead poet learning to walk backward against the wind
on the wrong side of the mirror. (14-18)

Pamela Matthews observes "truth is often associated with burning in Rich's poetry, which is suffused with images of burning, smoke, and fire" (2007, 40). Rich realizes the woman's true energy and power which emits from her feminine body, from her unconscious which resides far away from the males' dominated world and language, under 'these underground streets', her feminine language resides.

Rich gave up her blurred insight in the early phase, and now she is ready to face, to challenge, to be clear and to expose her feminine identity. In the essay, *Poetry and Poets in the Public Sphere*, Meydani & Tsur state regarding the capacity of poetry to bring political changes, that "poets are free from the constraints that obligate politicians... [poetry] often originates from the urge to love and be loved, from the need for social recognition" (2014, 144). After all the obstacles Rich faced in her earlier career, she needed social recognition, to challenge the constraints of the males' dominating literature by developing a new language, new possibilities to represent her feminine identity outside the mainstream discourse which privileged male's identity. In order to deconstruct the oppressor's language, Rich's feminist voice is revived with her feminist poetry. Rich's 'dead poet' learned to 'walk backward against the wind', against the patriarchal mode of expression. Rich's feminist voice which emanates from her feminine body, from her unconscious challenges the male discourse and takes a different path, another direction to walk 'against the wind'.

Rich uses her poetry to re-define the nature of power by searching for new sources of power for women. She needs poetry which has the ability to

reflect the truth of female's bitter conditions, poetry which helps her to see in the other 'side of the mirror', her strength, the animus side of her where she can experience 'the fullness of her power' away from the symbolic order which neglected her power within its realm. Cixous asserts that "poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women" (1976, 879-80). Finally, in her quest to change in her *I Dream*, Rich affords a journey to the dream world, to the unconscious world in order to deconstruct the patriarchal myths and to reconstruct female mythology that can help in the articulation of female voice.

Conclusion

Rich's heroic protagonist in *I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus*, endured a risky journey to the underworld, the realm of the unconscious, to save her 'dead poet', her feminist voice, and she manages to do so due to her dead poet 'walk' at the end of the poem. Rich uses the myth of Orpheus to deconstruct the Greek myth of the male poet-singer Orpheus who endured the heroic journey and he could not accomplish his mission by showing the female's activeness and power when she risks the same journey and succeeds in her mission to revive her 'dead poet'. Rich in her quest for change experiences a heroic mythical journey, a psychic journey, to deconstruct the patriarchal myths and to reconstruct the females' myths. Her journey to the territory of myth makes her an icon of transformation. Therefore, the study concludes that Rich in *I Dream* uses her feminine writing to liberate her poetry from the phallogocentric system. Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine* helped in introducing Rich's strategy of exposing the lies of patriarchal

culture and challenging the masculine discourse through re-writing new female myths that serve women's needs and desires.

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