

‘I refuse these givens’: Embracing Multiplicity of Identity in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich

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The world we live in is divided into clearly defined territories and oppositions. Some of these mutually exclusive and hierarchical binary oppositions that spring to mind are Activity/Passivity, Sun/Moon, Culture/Nature, Day/Night, Father/Mother. All these dichotomies spring from the ultimate binary opposition Man/Woman, which is gendered and takes the male as the reference point^[1]. The symbolism of Male/Female does not refer to two different halves of humanity, but it has been used to express and maintain the hierarchical and oppositional relationship between the sexes which is divided and based on the subordination of the female, as it is always the feminine side of these oppositions that carries the negative attributes. Such a system of organization takes man as its measure in defining everything, including woman. Luce Irigaray too, like Hélène Cixous, believes that only in a different order of meaning might it be possible to construct a positive representation of feminine identity. This requires the rejection of the ever powerful notion of universal truth, as its universality is a fallacy; it is universal only from the male perspective.

Adrienne Rich has been an influential figure in the arena of the feminist movement for decades not only with her poetry, but with her prose, and her person as an activist and a poet who has been deeply concerned with these dichotomies in her work, a state of trying “to be neither/nor” as she describes it.^[2]

Keeping this definition in mind, I would argue that Adrienne Rich rejects these traditional oppositions as universal definitions, and challenges the traditional boundaries between them. One important aspect that is vital in such a revisionist strategy on behalf of Rich is the refusal to treat female experience as marginal. Therefore, she writes as a woman and centralizes her experiences in her poetry.

Rich explores the idea that Man is the Self, and Woman is his Other, and that this Otherness is the only possible location for female existence. Hence, throughout her career she has been constantly engaged in the act of exploration and discovery within a system which permits the existence of the female identity only within its own prescribed notions. This journey, however, does not aim to discover an unchanging and fixed female self. On the contrary, she should be distanced from the idea of the changeless and static self. Therefore, multiplicity of the female anatomy is always foregrounded as a key theme in her work. In her poetry we can read the idea that the female subject cannot be clearly and finally defined since subjectivity is constantly changing. The female self is a subject in process of continuous becoming. This idea of multiplicity is in direct opposition to the clearly defined notions of

patriarchy which assume and perpetuate the notion of the unchanging subject. It allows the woman poet not to be imprisoned within binary oppositions, and opens up ways for the imagination of alternative systems of thought.

By blurring the boundaries between these territories of binary oppositions, Rich subverts the foundations of oppositional systems of ideology. By doing so, she explores new alternatives for imagination through which female identity can be imagined, defined, articulated not in relation to the male, but in feminine terms. The alternatives she offers are based on difference. But this difference is not to be thought in oppositional terms. It can be defined as a different kind of difference. It is to be based upon non-oppositional, and non-hierarchical thinking. The poet's questioning of the binary oppositions has the aim of making a connection between the two sides. I would argue that, however utopian, such a strategy might work towards healing the severe split between binary oppositions, and opening up ways of redefinition of critical concepts such as power and love through language.

Rich herself explains how her poetry serves her explorations when she says: "Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language. In setting words together in new configurations, in the mere, immense shift from male to female pronouns, in the relationships between words created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme, it lets us hear and see our words in a new dimension."^[3],

At this point, I would like to give an outline of Irigaray's theories that are used in this article. According to Freudian theory, we are born biologically male or female, but without the masculine and feminine gender identities encoded in us. The sexuality of the infant is polymorphous and unconfined to one specific body part. Hence, what constitutes 'normal' masculine and feminine sexuality is neither natural nor inherent. This aspect of Freudian theory is very important and liberating in terms of French feminist thought, as it does offer the possibility of subverting existing compulsory gender patterns. However, from this point onwards Freudian theory becomes problematic from the feminist point of view, as it centralizes 'castration' as the major determinant in the path of 'normal' adult sexuality. For both the male and the female child the first object of love is the mother. This pre-Oedipal phase of the child's life is dominated by the body of the mother experienced as a continuance of his or her own body. There is plenitude in this continuum. However, in order for the child to acquire his or her own identity, this continuum must be broken, as subjectivity must be defined in relation to objectivity. In order for a 'me' to exist, there must be a separate 'other'.

What resolves this crisis is the Oedipal complex. When the boy realizes that not every human being possesses a penis, he fears the threat of castration from the father. He represses his love for the mother and identifies with the father as the figure of authority. He then can aspire to possess a woman of his own when he is an adult.

For the girl however, this path is not as straightforward. On discovering that she is already castrated, she blames the mother for her physical inferiority, and adopts the father as her love object. From this point onwards her quest in life, according to Freud, becomes the search for a penis substitute. The girl still identifies with the mother, but only as a rival for the father's love. According to briefly outlined Freudian theory, the penis is the determining factor in the construction of sexual identity.

Jacques Lacan rereads Freudian theory in the light of linguistics. According to him, it is only through the system of language that we can make sense of the world. He declares the stage of separation from the mother as the 'mirror' stage in which the child acquires a sense of the self. Separation from the mother is completed with the child's entry into language. Lacan terms language the 'symbolic order' which represents the total structure of meaning. He argues that once the child is separated from the mother he or she has the need to speak to ask

for whatever is needed. Hence, Lacan argues, language is based on lack. He centralizes the phallus as its primary signifier, which forces women, who are the ones that lack the penis, into the margins of language. As they cannot identify with the language of the Father they are always alienated from language. Femininity is forced into exile as the only language available is a masculine one. The only language available to them is alienating because it cannot accommodate them as female subjects. Women have a very problematic relationship with patriarchal language.

The definition of the construction of language in terms of lack and loss is the underlying principle of binary oppositions, which French feminists, such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, struggle to destabilize. Since the phallus is deemed to be the primary signifier, woman is locked into the Other side of the binary opposition Self/Other, which is always defined in relation to the male subject. However, instead of trying to delete this Otherness, French feminism strives to emphasize the positive aspects of it. Otherness might allow women, as they are marginalized anyway, to be able to stand back and criticize the norms and values that patriarchal systems of thought try to impose on everyone as if they are ‘natural’ or ‘normal’. Hence, this notion of Otherness is turned upside down, emphasizing its possibilities for non-hierarchical difference and plurality. It has the potential to imagine a different kind of difference, non-oppositional and non-hierarchical. Only in this way can femininity, which exists at the level of potentiality, still to be imagined, defined, articulated, find a space of its own.

Luce Irigaray also suggests that multiplicity begins at the level of the anatomy of the female. In her writing the multiplicity that the female sexual organs imply are foregrounded. Instead of defining sexuality in *a priori* masculine terms, as in Freudian theory, Irigaray proposes multiplicity. She exposes the link between the myth of the unitary notion of truth and the male valorization of a single sexual organ within the phallogocentric system.^[4]

Adrienne Rich agrees with Irigaray on these issues. The first step Rich deems essential in her struggle for self definition is the necessity of understanding the nature of the culture we live in and the language we employ. In ‘Diving into the Wreck’, the title of which serves as a metaphor for the remnants of Western culture, she explores the impossibility of the definition of the female subject in feminine terms and its existence in multiplicity.^[5] The poem is an allegory of a modern hero reaching back towards the past. This time, however, the hero is a woman, and the whole watery submersion in the poem becomes a subversion of traditional male conquests. The speaker begins this journey “not like Cousteau with his / assiduous team”, but “alone” (*FD*, 162). By the end of the poem, however, she will realize that she has not been alone in this journey and is a part of a female community who shares her concerns. Her preparations for this hazardous descent into the depths of the ocean in the beginning of the poem echo archetypal male heroic quests:

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers

the grave and awkward mask. (*FD* 162)

She prepares for her journey with equipment in which she is not very comfortable. Her flippers are “absurd”, and the mask, which is compulsory for her to survive under water, feels “grave and awkward”. This mask, made up of patriarchal prescriptions, is what the female has to wear in order to exist within the system as it is not possible for her to define herself in her own terms. But as she descends in her journey towards the depths of the ocean, the speaker feels somehow liberated, as “there is no one / to tell me when the ocean / will begin” (*FD* 163). Already, she begins to shed the received ideas as the realm below the water becomes freer of conventions that label reality for the speaker. Following these lines, in the middle section of the poem, when the diver is crossing a boundary, Rich gives the reader her view of both masculine and feminine worlds. She writes:

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and the green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power. (*FD* 163)

In the masculine world she has to wear a mask to try to control the effects of nature. She must do this in order to be able to survive. Rich always regards the dominant masculine power as power-to-control. Such power in a masculine sense can only carry the diver until the middle section of the poem as it is not equipped to answer the needs and desires of the woman. Following this, the poet abandons it and the transforming power of the feminine is introduced:

the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element. (*FD* 163)

She has to learn to adjust herself to being under the water but no battle in the sense of a male heroic quest takes place here to achieve this. On the contrary, there is tranquillity and ease. Rich is working on a new myth that is not based on the power to dominate, but on the alternative understanding of the power of the feminine to transform and heal. She writes, “you breathe differently down here” (*FD*, 163). Under the water, instead of the ‘terrible mother’ there is the peace of the ‘womb of the mother’. With the image of breathing water, just as in the womb, the diver finds the power necessary to move along with her quest:

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.

I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail. (*FD* 163)

Even though she says “it is easy to forget / what I came for”, the diver is quite certain of her objective and determined to find out an alternative to the prescribed notions she has had to live her life with. She emphasizes this when she clarifies that “the thing I came for” is “the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth” (*FD*, 164). When she reaches the wreck itself what she finds is different to what she has been used to, as in the depths of the ocean there seems to be a unity between the mermaids and the mermen. She writes: “I am she: I am he” (*FD*, 164). Such a statement emphasizes the poet’s idea that the wreck under the ocean symbolizes a time which pre-dates the dualities, divisions, and binary oppositions of the Western psyche. The oppositions of subject and object, mind and matter, male and female are neither hierarchized nor valid in this realm. It is here at this point in time, in the pre-Oedipal stage “where the spirit began”. It is here that possibilities for change can be initiated. This is not an easy task and it gives relief to the diver to realize that at the end of this journey which she has ventured alone, she finds herself in a community of women like herself who have come for the same thing. Their aim is to revise the patriarchal book of myths which cannot accommodate them:

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear. (*FD* 164)

Thus, Rich aims to re-write a history that has not included women in its context apart from a marginalized position. Since even that margin is defined in male terms, it condemns woman to an existence of negativity in opposition to the male. Rich rejects this margin and advocates the necessity of women claiming their own stories in their own words. In this particular poem, with the crossing of the boundaries, the poet tries to identify the ‘inevitable’ Oedipal break that occurs between the mother and the daughter.

In order to create a possibility for the feminine to exist in its multiplicity defined not in relation to the singular masculine valorization but her own multiple anatomy, Irigaray suggests a return to the female imaginary, the semiotic, which has been excluded from the patriarchal order and finally effaced.^[6] This is the point in a child’s development before entry into the language, before patriarchal definitions and divisions have been established. At this stage, the child is in a continuum with the mother, and the bond between them has not been severed. There is still the possibility of identification with the mother in terms of womanhood in this imaginary state, as once the entry into the symbolic order has taken place, the mother’s identity is restricted by her reproductive and maternal function.

Rich, too, returns to the semiotic frequently in her work, a time and place where female multiplicity is still dominant. This is when the binary oppositions have not been established yet with the Oedipal stage. She employs this strategy in order to accommodate herself as a woman who is desired and desires in female terms. In the semiotic, woman can claim a sexual identity without being circumscribed with the compulsory choices of patriarchy, namely to exist either as a sexualized male or asexualized other. Only in the semiotic phase can a change be initiated. Bodily contact with the mother, in its intact form, enables the woman to experience love in feminine terms. Rich argues that this is different to love in male terms which Rich and Irigaray regard as akin to brutality and violence. The poet seems to link the war and destruction surrounding the world with male-dominated rule. Hence, she distances herself from masculinity surrounding her, and moves towards the feminine principle which she believes to be healing.

‘Sibling Mysteries’ is a poem which deals exactly with these issues. Here the poet attempts to present the mother-daughter relationship from a prepatriarchal historical perspective.^[7] The speaker reminisces about her own past and separation from her mother and sister, and is reconciled with both of them. The women presented in the first section of the poem are powerful and have strong connections with each other. They have not abandoned themselves and each other in order to exist within the dominant powers system. They do not deny their connection with nature and they are aware of the creative powers of not only circumscribed motherhood but also in terms of art and culture:

Remind me how we walked
trying the planetary rock
for foothold
...
smelling the rains before they came
feeling the fullness of the moon
before moonrise
...
Remind me how the stream
wetted the clay between our palms
...
how we traced our signs by torchlight
in the deep chamber of the caves ... (DC 47)

The strength of this community comes from their connectedness to each other as a whole and their positive relationship with nature. They retain and nourish their links with nature and treat it with respect. This is an important issue both for Rich and Irigaray as they regard the destruction of the world we live in a direct result of the patriarchal system. They argue that, at present, women have forgotten this erased history of strength and have

succumbed to the rules which deny them power unless it is limited to the prescriptions of patriarchal rule.

In the second section the poet remembers the original relationship between her mother and the daughters which was full of tenderness and security:

Remind me how we loved our mother's body

our mouth's drawing the first

thin sweetness from her nipples

...

how she floated great and tender in our dark

or stood guard over us

against our willing ... (*DC 48*)

She, like all women, indeed needs to be reminded of this pre-Oedipal relationship with the mother, as she becomes forced to abandon this first love in favor of the father. What she finds there is very different from her experiences with her mother. Here Rich reverses Freudian theory and creates a new realm in her imagination. The rules of this new realm are based on taking instead of giving and sharing of the mother. To her, the male "taking seemed a law" (*DC 48*). In the following sections, Rich builds up the estrangement of the daughter and dwells on the male domination and devaluation of women as she writes: "how beneath / the strange male bodies / we sank in terror or in resignation / and how we taught them tenderness" (*DC 49*).

The final lines of the poem promise a better future if women can claim a communal relationship between themselves and exchange their life experiences. The past unity could be claimed again if women are willing to work on it:

The daughters never were

true brides of the father

the daughters were to begin with

brides of the mother

then brides of each other

under a different law

Let me hold and tell you ... (*DC 52*)

These lines carry connotations of myths and tales that have been handed down from generation to generation, but here women tell their own stories to each other, instead of being dictated to by men or patriarchal women. Rich proposes a system in which women in general,

mothers and daughters in particular, can share each other's experience. Though her recollections of the past, and by returning to a time before the abandonment of the mother, she seems to achieve this unity in a scene which resembles a scene from a ritual.

It can be seen that, in Rich's poetry, it is this love of same (female) instead of different (male) that has the potential for change and holds the hope for the future. Irigaray defines this love as follows: "Love of same is love for that which primevally and necessarily has conceived, given birth, nourished, warmed. Love of same is love of indifferentiation from the earth-mother, the first living dwelling place."⁸ It is to this nourishing, warm, secure place that Rich wants to escape in 'Splittings' (*FD* 228-9). The poem is about the compulsory divisions that are deemed necessary for a woman to establish in order to be able to fit into the patriarchal norms. The speaker regards her life at present as being painful and tries to imagine alternatives. Her ally in her struggle is the "first dwelling place", in the words of Irigaray. She refuses to forget a primordial time where she felt love and was secure. In the following lines, the poet is quite certain she has to hold on to this relationship with the mother if she is going to survive:

I choose not to suffer uselessly
to detect primordial pain as it stalks toward me
flashing its bleak torch in my eyes blotting out
her particular being the details of her love
I will not be divided from her or from myself
by myths of separation... (*FD* 229)

The supposedly necessary separation from the mother divides the speaker of the poem not only from the first object of her love, but also from her own self as well. It also robs woman of the possibility of entering into language as a subject, since it is not possible for her to make a female identification with the mother without objectifying herself at the same time. So, Rich fantasizes going back to the womb of the mother where power in its masculine sense can change places with love:

I want to crawl into her for refuge lay my head
in the space between her breast and shoulder
abnegating power for love
as women have done or hiding
from power in her love like a man
I refuse these givens the splitting
between love and action I am choosing
not to suffer uselessly and not to use her
I choose to love this time for once

with all my intelligence... (FD 229)

Here Rich forcefully declines to accept the prescribed binary oppositions that are crucial to perpetuate patriarchal thought. The well known binary opposition of activity/passivity is traditionally coined with masculinity/femininity. In the poem, Rich uses the word “love” synonymously with passivity, as if to love and to be active are two mutually exclusive concepts and cannot live side by side. Love in the prescribed patriarchal sense requires utter passivity and surrender on woman’s behalf and paralyzes her, but in the above lines this notion is rejected. The poet refuses this “splitting” and chooses to renounce love in masculine terms, opting for her own understanding of the term which, she believes, will not cause her pain.

I think that the exploration of such issues by the theoretician and the poet alike underlines the fact that it is not only necessary, but essential to rethink these issues of the construction of subjectivity, binary oppositions, and female multiplicity, if women are ever to achieve self-definition in their own terms. The vision of both the theoretician and the poet involves understanding the traditional patriarchal myths which describe and prescribe the ‘nature’ of women. Only by unmasking them, and imagining new alternatives that women can claim their identities as desiring and loving beings. This is a task which has become the life’s work for the “pioneer, witness, and prophet”^[9], Adrienne Rich.

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