# FORM IS THE ULTIMATE GIFT': SHOWALTER'S LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL MODEL OF GYNOCRITICISM IN ADRIENNE RICH'S *A CHANGE OF WORLD*

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*Abstract*

Adrienne Rich starts her poetic career as a female poet following the established masculine linguistics and modes of writing, leading her to repress her real feelings and experiences as a woman. But through such a submissive craft, Rich creates a double-voiced discourse which furtively gives voice to her nonconforming feminist ideas. Rich employs masculine linguistics and aesthetics as a defense mechanism to keep herself from the threat of patriarchal criticism but beyond this masquerade she articulates her rebellious ideas which she was not prepared to utter consciously at the time. This paper, combining Showalter's linguistic and cultural model of gynocriticism which covers such tendencies in female writing, aims at finding networks of influence working in Rich's early poetry especially in *A Change of World.*

**Keywords: Adrienne Rich, *A Change of World*, linguistic and cultural model of gynocriticism.**

## Adrienne Rich's Conservatism in *A Change of World*

In patriarchal society women first start writing through an internalization of the standards of the dominant culture and imitation of its established modes of writing and behavior. They try to write as "equal to the intellectual achievements of the male culture" (Showalter, "Feminist Poetics" 35-6). Thus women as writers have always been under the influence of male patriarchy and their literary tradition, so they could never have an original, innovative and independent art. Showalter explaining such a basis for the female tradition quotes Mill saying that "if women lived in a different country from men and had never read any of their writings, they would have a literature of their own." Women have always been reared under the shadow of the male cultural imperialism the influence of which demands a long time and hard work for women to get emancipated from and to let women to drive their literature by their own impulse. (*A Literature of Their Own* 3-4) This is what happens to Adrienne Rich (1929-2012), an American voice of feminism. Having been brought up under patriarchal values, she was almost thoroughly governed by male literary imperialism and, consequently, her poetry was hardly self-defining in her beginning steps of writing especially in *A Change of World.*

Rich was brought up in a family where the father was blatantly dominating and expecting his children to conform to his expectations. She herself affirms this saying that women in her family were constantly urged by his father "to speak quietly in public, to dress without ostentation, to repress all vividness or spontaneity, to assimilate with a world which might see us as too flamboyant" (qtd. in Bennet 169). Awareness of these limitations in Rich's personal life directs one to her restrictions in a broader field, that is,

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her literary career which started under her father's supervision. It is fundamental, as Bennett notes, in understanding the "painful ambiguities that afflict the successful woman practitioner in a male-dominated field;" from the very beginning the patriarchal culture is molding, shaping and controlling every aspect of women's lives. (168-9)

Rich describes her father as a man with elaborate and distinct theories about childhood education. She was educated under her father's care with his specific precepts, as an educated man and it was under her father, who urged her to "work, work/ harder than anyone has worked before" and to aspire for excellence, and his education that Rich started writing poetry. (qtd. in Martin 167) Rich states her position as:

> [F]or about twenty years I wrote for a particular man, who criticized and praised me and made me feel I was indeed 'special.' […] I tried for a long time to please him, or rather, not to displease him. And then of course there were other men--writers, teachers--the Man, who was not a terror or a dream but a literary master and a master in other ways less easy to acknowledge. (Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* 38-9)

Besides encouraging Adrienne to write poetry at an early age, Arnold Rich taught his daughter to write letters copying outstanding masculine poets' works such as Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Moreover, Rich's father as a strict task master who set high standards for his daughter guided her to read such writers as "Tennyson, Keats, Arnold, Rossetti, Swinburne, Carlyle, and Pater" leading her to learn masculine linguistics and aesthetics which affected her early poetry. (Martin 173)

Thus, nurtured under the guidance of an exacting father and reading in his library through his books, Rich was utterly influenced by her father who challenged, provoked, and sometimes "complimented her writings" (Langdell 12). She tried to copy verses in his study and to compose following her masculine predecessors to satisfy her father's aspirations. In one of her early poems, named as "Juvenilia," Rich portrays her early state as a young female writer under the influence of her father's education and his male aesthetics and her attempts to achieve her father's approval with her "sedulous lines." Furthermore, Rich shows how she, as a young girl sitting in her father's studio, is heavily burdened by the weight of masculine literary tradition from the very beginning of her education:

> Your Ibsen volumes, violet-spined,
> each flaking its gold arabesque…
> Again I sit, under duress, hands washed,
> at your ink stained oaken desk, […]
> craning my neck to spell above me
> A DOLL'S HOUSE  LITTLE EYOLF
> WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN
> Unspeakable fairy tales ebb like blood through my head
> as I dip the pen and for aunts, for admiring friends,
> for you above all to read,
> copy my praised and sedulous lines.
> (Gelpi and Gelpi, *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* 17)



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Here Rich identifies the tensions and pressures on her poetic project from its very beginning, "the seductive, even sensual, appeal of tradition, form, and conventional--and conventionally masculine--aesthetic refinement and achievement" which she gets through her father. Rich's imagination, thus, "was regulated by her father's standards, which she labored to meet" (Wasley 163-4). Showalter referring to this aspect of a female writer's life quotes Woolf who considers such attentiveness of the fathers as "the dark devouring love of […] patriarchy;" this statement of Woolf's, Showalter argues, displays Woolf's and many other female writers' lifelong struggle to overcome the haunting shadow of their fathers' demands on them. (*Literature of Their Own* 62-4)

But like many other female writers', Rich's literary restrictions do not end in her father's demands. As Rich herself notes, there was always a man who functioned as a literary master. Until the fourth grade Rich received education from her father. Then she was sent to a country school after which she left home for Radcliffe College "where [she] did not see a woman teacher for four years" and where she was taught the poetic craft of male poets that affected her writing in her first two volumes of poetry, *A Change of World* and *The Diamond Cutters*, published after her graduation from the college. Rich herself points to this fact, "I know that my style was formed first by male poets: by men I was reading as an undergraduate --Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden, MacNeice, Stevens, and Yeats. What I chiefly learned from them was craft" (*On Lies* 38).

The evidence of Rich's early poems, according to Wasley, especially those included in her *A Change of World*, further proves the effects of male literary canon in Rich's early writing. The line "The glass had been falling all afternoon," taken from the poem "Storm Warning," for instance, evokes not only Auden's "elegiac barometric 'instruments' from 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats'" reflecting their shared cultural anxieties but also Audenesque language and ideas. Similarly, other poems in this book also reflect the influence of male aestheticism specifically that of Auden. "At a Bach Concert," for instance, evidently echoes Auden's language and his specific terms such as "a love that is not pity," "union of necessity," and "suffering." Another one of Auden's influences, as a male poet and Rich's master on her, is her "tendency to allegorize and generalize from specific objects and characters" and her use of plain speech as an instrument of both "irony and civic truth-telling" (157):

> Coming by evening through wintry city
> We said that art is out of love with life.
> Here we approach a love that is not pity.
>
> This antique discipline, tenderly severe,
> Renews belief in love yet masters feeling,
> Asking of us a grace in what we bear.
> (*The Fact of a Doorframe* 5)

As Spiegelman observes, it is the echo of Auden's voice imitated by a school girl who seeks the approval of her pedagogic and paternal elders which is heard through the lines of these poems. ("Voice of the Survivor" 371-3) Randall Jarrell also points to such



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traces of male literary tendency and linguistics as Auden's influence on Rich's writing in his review of her early poetry. He describes one of her poems as such: it is "like getting one of Auden's old carbons for Christmas" (qtd. in Wasley 157).

Hence, through using masculine linguistics and male aestheticism, women writers writing in patriarchal society seek approval of their male masters and publishing literary circles. Showalter supports this idea quoting Elizabeth Robins, the first president of Women Writers Suffrage League. Robins asserts that no female writer has been free to explore female consciousness:

> The realization that she had access to a rich and yet unrifled storehouse may have crossed her mind, but there were cogent reasons for concealing her knowledge. With that wariness of ages which has come to be instinct, she contented herself with echoing old fables, presenting a man-governed world puppet as nearly as possible like those that had from the beginning found such favor in men's sight. There [in print]… she must wear the aspect that shall have the best chance of pleasing her brothers. Her publishers are not women. ("Feminist Poetics" 34)

Female writers have to struggle against such "overwhelming odds" to write, publish, and gain the public approval. (Showalter, "Feminist Poetics" 39) It is this very tradition which affected Rich's writing in her *A Change of World*.

Female tradition, Showalter notes, originates from the still-evolving relationship between female writers and their society. It is the result of a complex network of relationships and influences which operates in a course of time and expresses itself through language and form which are themselves laid open to be subject to a network of conventions. Thus, the wide range of verbal restrictions placed on women initiates from the long tradition of male dominance and is reinforced by the critics' attentiveness. Therefore, the language women are expected to use in a patriarchal society, especially before the feminist movement of 1970s which emancipated women from some of the patriarchal restrictions imposed on them, is a "foreign" language refined from all kinds of sustaining and vigorous exclamations, else they would be subject to harsh criticism and unreceptiveness of the literary environment by being rebuked for their unconventionality. (*Literature of Their Own* 25) Rich's use of masculine language and formalist form and style of writing reveals such a network of influences, originating from the patriarchal values, which affect her choice of language, writing and style.

Showalter pointing to the way that male powers, even male writers and critics, force women clearly or distinctly to take male aesthetics in their writing or pieces of criticism mentions Robert Boyers, as an example of such critics and writers, who in one of his essays entitled "A Case against Feminist Criticism" describes feminist criticism as an insistence on asking the same questions of every work and "demanding ideologically satisfactory answers to those questions as a means of evaluating it." Criticizing this article, Showalter maintains that Boyers' "terminology is best understood as a form of intimidation, intended to force women into using a discourse more acceptable to the academy" ("Feminist Poetics" 23). That is why female writers in a patriarchal society



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rather than confronting and opposing the values of the dominant male society set to acquire its rewards. As a consequence, "repression, concealment, and self-censorship" become part of the literary mission women undertake in a patriarchal society. (*Literature of Their Own* 25) This is exactly the system under which Rich is educated and the effects of which we can trace in her first book of verse. Rich in *A Change of World* employs a neoclassical tone and style in her literary discourse creating "alternate selfhoods, distanced from her real self" to gain the approval of the male fellows and critics as she does. (Langdell 11)

Using the already mentioned methods, Rich gains Auden's approval for her collection, *A Change of World*, for which he writes a foreword. Auden, with his insistence on the necessity of following a past (masculine) tradition of writing and fidelity to such a manner of writing, attempts to review Rich's first volume of poetry, written at a time when she was merely twenty one years old. He praises Rich for displaying "craftsmanship," which Eliot defines as the poet's talent in versification, uniformity of diction and tone, and their fitness to the subject at hand, as a sign of her respect for her elder masters, such as Robert Frost and W. B. Yeats, and their (male) aesthetics. (365) Gelpi sums up Auden's expectation of a good female poet in these words: "the stereotype--prim, fussy, and schoolmarmish--that has corseted and strait-laced women-poets into 'poetesses' whom men could deprecate with admiration," that is, women whom the patriarchy is sure about being able to control and dominate over. (283) Besides, Yorke identifies Auden's note on Rich's first book as "patronizing faint praise" which reflects the cultural mores dominating the fifties, that is, the male-centered desire for female poets to be subservient and respectful both to him and to the establishment. (24)

Rich herself was also aware of the underlying implications of such praises: "I had known the ambiguities of patronizing compliments from male critics" (*On Lies* 21). As she mentions in one of her later poems, the male critics flatter female writers' "mediocrities" since they are a sign of women's obedience to the male masters:

> Time is male
> And in his cups drinks to the fair.
> Bemused by gallantry, we hear […]
> Our mediocrities over-praised,
> Indolence read as abnegation,
> Slattern thought styled intuition (*Snapshots* 24)

It is her submission to the male aestheticism of her masters which is admired by such critics as Auden. Referring to such praises, Rich in a note on her poetry prize for *A Change of World* points out that the judges' description of the book with such adjectives as "forceful" and "masterful," were apparently meant in praise but they are "interesting in terms of politics of language." Variations of the word "mastery" appear three times in three poems in *A Change of World*. Rich started her job as a poet by searching for formal skill and "mastery" of craft but little by little she comes to look at such "mastery" as



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conventional craft of poetry and verse forms to be "symptoms of oppressive patriarchy" (Wasley 156).

That is why Rich later on in *What is Found There*, referring to this period of her writing notes: "If anything, I cherished a secret grudge against Auden--not because he didn't proclaim me a genius, but because he proclaimed so diminished a scope for poetry, including mine. I had little use for his beginnings and middles. Yet he was one of the masters" (191). By the word "mastery" Rich does not merely refer to Auden's skill and genius as a writer and a teacher but by this term she also refers to gender hierarchy and oppression. Auden, according to Wasley, is an embodiment of the obstacles which a female poet must break and the forces which she must struggle against in order to be able to find her voice. He is an epitome of "the repressive masculine authority whose shackles she must throw off" (154-55).

**Rich's Conservatism in *A Change of World* Through the Light of Showalter's Linguistic and Cultural Model of Gynocriticism**

Showalter notes that the language and the style which a writer uses to write are under the influence of several determinants, including ideological and cultural, and such factors as genre, tradition, memory and context. Women, due to such factors, have been forced into "silence, euphemism, or circumlocution" ("Feminist Criticism" 193). Women have always been confronted with strict limitations in their linguistic productions and some words and expressions have traditionally been forbidden for them and suppressed in their work. Therefore, the American literary criticism in those places where we can trace an exclusive and unique verbal environment retreating from "structure of social forces" is exclusively male, (as one can see in Auden's criticism of Rich's work and the terminology he uses for this purpose.) Consequently, "a personal and oppositional style" of writing has also been entirely masculine which could be explained by social obstacles for female self-development including verbal obstacles since women must make use of, to use Rich's words, "the oppressor's language" (Showalter, "Literary Criticism" 449-51).

All over the history, as Gelpi observes, men have been the major oppressors and "their language has been a chief instrument of oppression" (298). Women, as it is the case with Rich in her first volume of poetry, have always had to give voice to their ideas through masculine language and aesthetics. Showalter, talking about women's linguistic limitations and obstacles, quotes Richardson: "in speech with a man a woman is at a disadvantage--because they speak different languages. She may understand his. Hers he will never speak or understand. […] She must therefore, stammeringly, speak his. He listens and is flattered" ("Literary Criticism" 450). This is the case with Rich who is led by such a tradition to use male linguistics and aesthetics and, thus, by whose early works Auden is flattered and feels satisfied.

Besides, Showalter emphasizes that "too many literary abstractions which claim to be universal have in fact described only male perceptions, experiences and options, and have falsified the social and personal contexts in which literature is produced" ("Feminist



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Poetics" 24). No theoretical manifesto, Showalter believes, is sufficient enough for embracing women's problems and their status, sex roles, the family, or sexual politics. Feminist criticism is more of an ideology rather than a methodology while one of the most essential principles in feminist criticism is the necessity of correspondence and interplay between what is written and the actual life outside in the society. Supporting this idea Showalter quotes Rich who asserts that "a radical criticism of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see- and therefore live- afresh." A reliable feminist criticism would give an account of women's writing in relation to real society and their lived experience. (qtd. in "Literary Criticism" 436-7) This is what Showalter's linguistic model and her idea of women's discourse as a double-voiced discourse in her cultural model of gynocriticism analyzes.

Showalter's linguistic model of gynocriticism focuses on the issue of language usage in male and female writings asking such questions as "whether men and women use language differently; whether sex differences in languages usage can be theorized in terms of biology, socialization, or culture; and whether women can create new languages of their own." Furthermore, it starts an attack on what Rich calls "the oppressor's language" criticized as either "sexist" or "abstract." Showalter, quoting Furman, explains that it is through language that we find similarities and differences between male and female writings but the problem is that "male-centered categorizations predominate in American English and subtly shape our understanding and perception of reality; that is why attention is increasingly directed to the inherently oppressive aspects for women of a male-constructed language system." Showalter points that the dominant mode of discourse marks the dominant masculine ideology; Hence, when a woman writes or speaks herself into existence, she is forced to speak in something like a foreign tongue, a language which she may be personally uncomfortable with. ("Feminist Criticism" 190) This is what could be traced in Rich who, having been brought up and totally governed by masculine values and aesthetics, was forced to use a masculine language in her first steps of literary creation especially in *A Change of World*. She herself pointing to the problems which led her to utilizing male linguistics and aesthetics for self-expression notes that the appalling prospect of "male judgment along with the active discouragement and thwarting of her needs by a culture controlled by males, has created problems for the woman writer: problems of contact with herself, problems of language and style, problems of energy and survival" (qtd. in Keyes 29).

Therefore, a male-defined language could be identified as the root of the problem of female oppression. Women writers have been denied the language and the consciousness to express what they felt and suffered through, an oppression which even expands into the twentieth century in spite of so much of women's revolutionary movements against patriarchal oppression. Thus, female writers in a patriarchal society are "metaphorically paralyzed" (Showalter, *Literature of Their Own* 27-8). As a consequence, Rich like other female writers writing under such a system is supposed to use the



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dominant language and aesthetics. Rich employs masculine linguistics and aesthetics as a defense mechanism to keep herself from the threat of patriarchal criticism through an obedient art form and language. Therefore, she sets for a set of formalist values and male aesthetics; since, as she states in "At a Bach Concert":

> Form is the ultimate gift that love can offer-
> The vital union of necessity
> With all that we desire, all that we suffer
>
> A too-compassionate art is half an art.
> Only such proud restraining purity
> Restores the else-betrayed, too-human heart.
> (*The Fact of a Doorframe* 5)

Using the dominant form without the interference of any kind of emotions from the side of the female writer is the only strategy which she can use to be able to publish in a patriarchal society.

Rich herself, commenting on this period of her poetic career, points out that these poems "were queerly limited; in many cases I had suppressed, omitted, falsified even, certain disturbing elements, to gain that perfection of order" (Gelpi and Gelpi 165). As a beginner in writing poetry, she should have displayed her reverence for the patriarchal cultural mores, dominating the fifties, which demanded women to deny their own power and to express a woman "utterly at odds with the sense of aggressive power and virile ego strength" that women like Rich were experiencing within their female selves. Therefore, it is "elegance, evasion, reserve and decorum" that mark Rich's early poetry. (Yorke 22-3). Rich states:

> When I was in my twenties especially, I was going through a very sort of female thing--of trying to distinguish between the ego that is capable of writing poems, and then this other kind of being that you are asked to be if you're a woman, who is, in a sense denying that ego. I had great feelings of split about that for many years actually, and there are a lot of poems I couldn't write even, because I didn't want to confess to having that much aggression, that much ego, that much sense of myself. (24)

This is exactly the situation which Showalter describes for female writers in a male-dominated society. The language that women are expected to use in a patriarchal society is a foreign language denied of all kinds of "robust and sustaining expletives." They are entirely deprived of a language for articulating their feelings of either pain or pleasure. (*Literature of Their Own* 25-6) Correspondingly, Rich, in her beginning steps of writing uses such a foreign tongue to be able to survive in a male-dominating context. By making male language and strategies of writing as hers, Rich uses them for her rebellious purposes. She mentions such ingenious strategies used by female writers as "the dependent's power to disguise her feelings;" they function as a mask for the female writer to "wheedle" the governing male patriarch, under whose inspection women's writings were published and judged, and to express ideas which they cannot openly acknowledge to be theirs. (*Of*



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*Woman Born* 56) As Keyes notes, "Whereas man can express the energy of his ego, woman must hold within" to be able to survive in a male-dominated society. Thus, the chief attribute of Rich's first volume of poetry is the presence of "a tension between energy and restraint" (17-18). Rich conceals her energy and her feminist ideas through restraint and a mask of obedience.

This is what Showalter also points to in women's writings; she believes that women writers find it their only chance left to satisfy at least some of their needs of self-expression through "self-mortification." Studied submission along with "covert pursuit of self-interest" is one of the effective strategies contrived by the female writers to deal with masculine dominance (in writing) for the purpose of unnoticed self-expression. (*Literature of Their Own* 57) She elaborates this idea in her cultural model of gynocriticism. Women, according to Showalter, constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by, the dominant (male) group. Therefore, they choose innovative and covert strategies in creating an intense, compact, symbolic, and profound literature for portraying their boundaries and giving voice to their rebellious ideas. They convey their frustration through the disguise of an acceptable form of feminine expression. Therefore, women's writing functions as a "double-voiced discourse" which contains the voices of both the dominant and the muted group. Accordingly, Rich's first period of writing is a double-voiced discourse which, though apparently submissive to the masculine mode of writing, furtively contains, to use Showalter's words, a "muted frustration" ("Feminist Criticism" 199-201) over the constraints over her literary life, as a woman, articulated through the disguise of male linguistic and aesthetic priorities.

Therefore, feminist attitude of Rich's poetry in the fifties articulates itself through apparently submissive feminine poems and through "the grain of this stylized poetry" (Yorke 23). The perfect quatrain in the following poem, for instance, which meticulously follows the masculine iambic pentameter form is used for disguising Rich's feminist criticism with regard to the "massive weight" of marriage upon women's hands:

> Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
> Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
> The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
> Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.
> (*The Fact of a Doorframe* 4)

The harmony, order, and perfection of the lines which Rich, as an obedient girl for her literary masters, uses serve as a means of disguise for her repressed rebellious ideas; she employs such masculine aesthetics to hide the struggling, self-divided woman, the poet. Therefore, Rich's early poems might at first glance seem to be an "orthodox 'vase'" but beyond the submissive feminine surface of the early poems one can see Rich's rebellious feminist vision. Keyes, supporting this idea, quotes Abel who asserts that female authors, like female characters in women's fiction, devise some ingenious strategies in order to portray their real hidden feelings and to gain a mode of assertion. This is the



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strategy which Rich uses in her early poetry. Rich, after the first publication of her poetry, was introduced into the public by her reviewers as "a good imitator" but beyond her submissive imitation Rich finds a furtive "mode of assertion" which is undetected by her male reviewers, including Auden. (16)

This is the one chance left for a true woman writer to articulate her objections against the patriarchy. While a true *woman* goes for submission, a true *writer*, according to Ostriker, goes for assertion. Even though the language we as women speak is "an encoding of male privilege, what Rich calls an 'oppressor's language,'" which is incompetent to portray women's experience, a "Law of the Father" which makes women invisible or makes them silent without having any access to authoritative voice, we must turn it to be able to use it in another way to our benefit; we must "'seize speech' and make it say what we mean." This is what women writers have done throughout their long history of writing under patriarchy; they give their self-portrayals in code forms through stealing male language and disguising their "passion as piety, rebellion as obedience" (Ostriker 69). This is exactly what Rich did in *A Change of World*; while she used male language and masculine aesthetics in her first volume of poetry, and while such critics as Auden considered it as a modest approval of her male predecessors and as a sign of her obedience, Rich used such a strategy of submission as a disguise for her nonconforming ideas. She grabbed male linguistic forms in order to be empowered to speak through making it say what *she*, as a woman, had in mind. These strategies are, nevertheless, subversive to masculine ideology. To use Showalter's words, they work "ceaselessly to deconstruct it: to write what cannot be written" ("Feminist Criticism" 191).

Hence, having been exposed to the political horrors of language and its falseness, which is reflected by the way the masculine language governs and controls female literary creativity including Rich's early poetry, Rich aspires to "discover in language a map not only for herself but also for the larger community." But critics have ignored Rich's innovativeness with regard to linguistic concerns. "Presence, and representation, the presence of reality to a linguistic understanding of it" are, based on Spiegelman, the subjects which obsessed Rich's mind who chose to incorporate her revolutionary ideas through an alien linguistic medium in her early literary mission. ("City of Words" 370-72) The tone of Rich's early poems in her first volumes is detached and refined; the style is "terse, dry, impersonal […] characteristic of formalist poetry" (Yorke 37). But the toughly controlled feminist voice of the early poems could still be heard through the critical rebellious voice of the poet which she tried to bury behind the rigid masculine formalism of the poems as she notes in one of her later poems "The Corpse-Plant:" "Only death's insect whiteness/ crooks its neck in a tumbler/ where I place its sign by choice." Here Rich portrays herself in her early period of writing as a poet in the "specter" of male critical attack which brings about a kind of death for the author; and thus, she, behind the stylized formalist lines, brings such a literary dominance and hierarchy under question. (Yorke 37)



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Another example of such a strategic subservience could be traced in Rich "An Unsaid Word":

> She who has the power to call her man
> From that estranged intensity
> Where his mind forages alone,
> Yet keeps her peace and leaves him free,
> And when his thoughts to her return
> Stands where he left her, still his own,
> Knows this the hardest thing to learn.
> (Gelpi and Gelpi, *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* 7)

To begin with the style, this poem is a portrayal of thorough obedience of a female writer to male aestheticism in its formalist style, its rhyme scheme, and its syntax. The poem is written in iambic tetrameter, basically masculine. It is expressed in a syntactically perfect, single sentence form the fluidity of which is "uninterrupted by the rhyme scheme (ABABAAA)." In terms of theme, the poem might at first glance seem to be a woman's utter subservience to male domination and monopoly and might even exasperate feminist critics in its portrayal of women's submission to sexual roles which allow men to wander freely as they wish while the woman stands "where he left her" fulfilling male wishes and keeping her words of complaint "unsaid" (Keyes 19-20). But to look deeply inside, Rich uses such strategies in order to disguise her real feminist intentions, which the patriarchal society and literary circle does not allow her to overtly acknowledge. Having been forced to use a foreign tongue to express their ideas, women authors, including Rich, use such masculine structures and preferences in their writings in order to be able to write, to use Showalter's words, "what cannot be written" ("Feminist Criticism" 191). Therefore, the attentive reader will be able to catch up the voice of the muted behind the apparent submissive voice of the subservient persona.

The voice of the muted woman could be detected from the very beginning of the poem, that is, the title, "An Unsaid Word," immediately followed by the phrase "she who has power," implying the idea that a woman's genuine power lies in her ability to use masculine language for her own female purposes to give voice to her unuttered thoughts and feelings. It is in these "unsaid words" that women's real power could be found. Moreover, the line before the last line, "stands where he left her," which apparently displays women's loyalty to men is followed by "this the hardest thing to learn." This line could be interpreted as Rich's covert criticism against the prescribed feminine role and the restrictions which it imposes upon women: She finds these limits confining because she must repress her "most elemental feelings" as she does in her first volume of poetry. Rich could not overtly articulate such criticism of sex roles, a restriction which leads a woman to "such negative experiences as denial and disguise." She even uses the pronoun "she" to keep the distance from whatever is said or unsaid in the poem. Rich does think and breed such critical thoughts but does not dare to openly acknowledge it. (Keyes 21) Therefore, to use Showalter's words, through the formal graceful surface of the poem, deceiving the



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male critic, and through using a "foreign tongue" which she, as a woman, is forced to use, a female writer (like Rich) articulates her feminist ideas. ("Feminist Criticism" 191)

Hence, "An Unsaid Word," under the disguise of a subservient art form, highlights Rich's rebellious feminist ideas including her objection to gender-difference permitted in a sexist ideology. Though the title suggests that there is a suspended word held in abeyance and, simultaneously, the content also conveys the inability of the persona to accept the imperative the poem develops, "An Unsaid Word" ends with an image of masculine dominance, portraying the present ultimate ruling power and thus criticizing such a structure. Therefore, as the poem is governed by the masculine "prosodic skill and syntactical control," so is the poet-persona's personal will and identity, (McGuirk 310-11) leading her to use male aestheticism for articulating her feminist criticism to such dominance.

Similarly, "Mathilde in Normandy," on the surface seems to be dealing with the story of a subservient woman, Queen Mathilde, William the Conqueror's wife, who after her husband's departure for the war stays at home weaving the "Bayeaux tapestry, which depicts the Norman Conquest of England." Therefore, superficially it is the story of a passive subservient woman doing a *proper lady*'s pastime, an apparently trivial job which is set at contrast to her husband's duty to go to the battlefield:

> Here is the threaded headland, […]
> And the outlandish attitudes of death
> In the stitched soldiery. That this should prove
> More than the personal episode, more than all
> The little lives sketched on the teeming loom
> Was withheld from you; self-conscious history
> That writes deliberate footnotes to its action
> Was not of your young epoch. For a pastime
> The patient handiwork of long-sleeved ladies
> Was esteemed proper.
> (Gelpi and Gelpi, *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* 5)

Rich's speaker speaks quite at a distance from Mathilde, and the dominant voice of the poem communicates the theme through such "abstract terms" as: "personal episode," "little lives," self-conscious history," "deliberate footnotes," and "young epoch." The poem is a thorough depiction of Rich's use of formalism and emotional detachment from what she narrates. Nothing in the poem catches the male critic's attention but the beauty of imagery used in it and "if there are 'knots' in this poem, they will slip by without much notice." Rich's craft approaches to what Auden dubs Rich's *A Change of World* with and praises for, that is, "a capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible." But Rich uses this formalist distant surface, appreciated by the male critic, and the metaphor of weaving "as metaphor for ordinary female creativity" as a strategic device to render her forbidden thoughts or, to quote Keyes, to handle certain unorthodox materials. This weaving, much like Rich's poetry in her first phase of writing contains no observable knots for the patriarchal reader; it requires the suffering attentive



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readers', women's, attention to reach its point. For the conscious reader, beyond the superficial portrayal of a dependent, passive and submissive woman, this poem deals with such themes as the creative power of women and their "envy of man's freedom to roam, to fight, to vanquish" (25-8); that is, a subject which Rich cannot openly acknowledge to be meant by her but which is voiced through the disguise of her formalist male aestheticism creating a "double-voiced discourse" containing both the voice of the dominant and the muted. (Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 201)

Likewise, in another poem entitled "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" from the same book, *A Change of World*, Rich intelligently portrays women's predicament, generally, and her own situation, specifically, as a female artist through the disguise of an obedient female writer following masculine formalist style of writing. The poem explores the tension between "the protagonist's creativity and her social circumstances." The dominant institutional discourse and its definitions exerts an agonizing influence over Aunt Jennifer's sense of self making her to be "terrified" and "mastered" by its power. (Werner 14) This is exactly the situation which Rich is trapped in; "mastered" and "terrified" by masculine literary rules, Rich chooses a conservative manner of writing through following the dominant discourse disguising her revolutionary ideas through her artistic creation. Therefore, the word "master" is profoundly significant in that it illustrates the mastery or domination of patriarchy over a woman that is reflected in demanding a mastery of form from the female artist. (Langdell 26-7)

Rich, mastered by her male superiors, uses traditionally accepted masculine forms for her poetry including this poem. "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" is written in "perfect quatrains in iambic pentameter" conforming to the male aesthetic preferences. (Langdell 26) Furthermore, having articulated her feminist rebellious ideas through "traditional use of accent clusters," Rich proves to be capable of the mastery of form which the male aestheticism demands of female writers. But ironically enough, as it was mentioned before, so long as women are brought up and educated under patriarchal system, alternative forms demonstrate to be of use for rebellious critical ideas, as it is the case in this poem. The accent clusters used in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" portray both "the oppressive atmosphere of her marriage […] and the world of her creative transcendence." Moreover, the rapid tempo, which Rich uses for the tigers before disturbing the rhythm by the introduction of the wedding band, represents the power of such an art. (Werner 15)

Therefore, through perfect rhyme forms and formalist style which Rich uses in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" to prove her submissiveness to masculine aestheticism and to satisfy the male critics, as she does by Randall Jarrell describing her style as "close to water, close to air," Rich further evades acknowledging any sort of potential feminist attitude. (qtd. in Keyes 23) Furthermore, in this poem again, like in "An Unsaid Word," she does not enter into the story; Rich, as the speaker, by using the pronoun "She," remains completely detached from the story of Aunt Jennifer, her persona, so that she



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could be able to covertly give voice to her feminist ideas without raising any doubt of the patriarchy against herself.

Besides, the image of a traditional woman weaving tigers through her wool is very much helpful to the purpose. Aunt Jennifer's embroidery functions as a disguise to prevent any doubt of the masculine literary circle for her anti-femininity. But the fact is that the tigers in Aunt Jennifer's piece of quilt are not merely the art of a traditional woman subservient to the trivial roles prescribed for her by the patriarchy; rather they serve as a symbolic embodiment of the confident female artist who is certain of her innate powers, "fixed and framed within the screen, as within the art form" (Yorke 25). This is exactly the case with Rich herself who is hiding her power behind her formalist art frame. Therefore, though caged behind the bars, Rich displays a glimpse of the feminist insights which are going to fuel the fury of her later writings through the picture of a submissive female writer accepting the bars of her cage.

Thus, as the woman persona who disguises her real power, the suppressed tiger, behind her needlework, as an act of submission to the patriarchal role prescribed for women, so does Rich through disguising her feminist ideas behind her submissive craft. Rich's intelligent use of male aestheticism to cover her nonconformist ideas becomes more tangible in the last stanza:

> 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.
> (*The Fact of a Doorframe* 4)

Although Rich did not openly acknowledge her feminist ideas, her tigers "will go on prancing" under the disguise of a submissive work of a woman writer. Rich, like her persona who "projects what she is denied onto her handiwork," projects her feminist ideas through her compliant craft. Just as Aunt Jennifer for whom the pride and strength of her tigers function as a complement for "her life of frustrated confinement," Rich's literary works function as the same. (Keyes 24)

Rich uses the traditional craft of poetry to conceal her rebellious ideas which she was not prepared to risk consciously at the time. She tries to communicate her feminist ideas through different male accepted media including formalism, traditional prosody, and sound patterns. The sound "f" in Aunt Jennifer's name is echoed only in "fear" which is symptomatic of Jennifer's "faltering before masculine power;" moreover, the convergence of this sound, with its implications, with "h" (reiterated in "hand," heavily," and "hard") and "flat vowel sounds" ("pull," "massive," "uncle," "upon") highlights Jennifer's entrapment in marriage bonds. Furthermore, the repetition of "f," "h," and "d" sounds (in "terrified," "dead," "hands," "ordeals") along with "m" sound of such words as "men," "massive" and "mastered" imply the ultimate destruction of an artist's creativity under the repressive power of male mastery and dominance. But the final lines of the poem refer to the aesthetic genius of female artists enabling them to



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incorporate such an experience of male dominance into a "tapestry testifying the transformative power of women's creativity." Jennifer's "tigers" transform the "g" and "er" of "ringed" and "mastered" into an emblem of power quilted in Jennifer's wool art by her own hands. Therefore, "made" emerges from such words as "mastered," "dead" and "ordeal" associated with masculine domination versus female suffering. All in all, "the process of art (made) and the content of art (the tigers) provide a frame within which Rich reasserts the *p* sounds" emphasizing the *power* of female creativity: "The tigers in the panel that she made/ Will go on prancing proud and unafraid." Like the proud chivalric tigers of her poem, Rich's power as an artist derives from her possession of traditionally masculine attributes. Her art, like that of Jennifer, suggests that traditional images may be charged with subversive significance within the women's tradition. (Werner 16-17)

Thus, these poems specifically deal with women's experiences; they do have such palpable feminist substance which the aesthetic distance of formalism cannot destroy. "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," as a significantly formalist poem shows us "certain fissures in the image of traditional womanhood and obliquely asserts the secret subtext of formalist female selfhood, the madwoman whom the controlled poet can barely handle, even with asbestos gloves." Aunt Jennifer's embroidered tigers which against all odds continue "prancing, proud and unafraid" represent her inner strength as a woman while her actual life "is ringed with [masculine] ordeals." It also foreshadows Rich's feminist attitude in writing poetry, which is the characteristic of her poetry in the years to come after the publication of her first volume of verse. (Langdell 26-8)

Having been exposed to such reflections of feminist beginnings in Rich's early poetry, one begins to suspect that Rich's visionary feminist ideas began in the sixties; she believes that "signs of it can be found even in her early emulation of the formalism of those poets whom she admired." The feminine surface of the poems in her early volumes communicate a totally different story in their depths; these poems deal with the power that the female artist feels but dares not openly express- at least in America of 1950s. They represent "a female imagination capable of hostility against repression, the strength of tigers, ['Aunt Jennifer's Tigers,'] and the cruelty of an invading army, ['Mathilde in Normandy']" (Keyes 28).

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