

Subaltern Bodies in Fluid Space of a Female Body:

A Feminist Existential Study of Adrienne Rich's Poems

'Diving in the Wreck' & 'Planetarium'

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Abstract

This research explores the subaltern bodies occupying a fluid space in a female body in Adrian Rich's poems 'Diving in the Wreck' and 'Planetarium'. Rich opines that the space of 'female' body is a natural home to both 'she' and 'he' simultaneously and is capable to excel in all walks of life, without being dependent on men for recognition. A search for relocation of female space in the patriarchal myth and the affirmation of the presence of both male and female sex within a single female body, as a source of power and strength is sought after in this study. The objective is to debunk the role of patriarchal myth in the construction and commodification of 'female' body. Moreover, our impetus for writing this research paper is to address the gap in the present scholarship regarding the recognition of the contribution made by people with diverse tendencies either homosexual, LGBTQ community and by 'lesbian continuum' in the postmodern era. Recognizing their talents and achievements can win them over to an equal status of efficient and responsible citizens of society. The study will incorporate the theoretical framework of Simon de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism. It will facilitate future researchers in excavating the potentials and abilities of women, who have been downsized by hierarchal order of society.

Keywords: Subaltern; Body; Patriarchy; Homosexual; Recognition; Self.

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1. Introduction

The 'Subaltern bodies' occupying the fluid space of a female body are the multiple voices of 'female self' which are 'unheard' in the patriarchal society. Pushed back and relegated to female sub-conscious as sinful wrinkles in her marginalized female existence. Female body is alienated from her Self and is made into Other. Male occupy the central position of female Self, and female is made into the Other. The natural abilities and the capacities of womanhood are circumscribed by the imperatives imposed by men in gender roles. Hence, services and achievements of women are not acknowledged and gets eclipsed by domineering male body. 'Matriarchy' is associated with submissiveness and subjugation of women, whereas 'Patriarchy' with its characteristic of power, infused in the body of law and language, is attributed to men. In the postmodern era, women are still subjugated and oppressed, owing to this division of power and are forced into compliance with their situation, particularly after marriage. There is a need to challenge men's prejudiced, biased, and marginalized compromised version of women. Feminist such as de Beauvoir and Adrienne Rich have voiced their concern for these feminine issues in their works. Rich writes (Notes on politics), "We are not the women question, we are the women who ask question". Thus it is vital to locate female space in this male dominated world. But it is not a physical location of woman in the social strata which is sought after here, but what is required is the defining of the position of woman by woman. According to Adrienne Rich (Planetarium), "What we see we, and seeing is changing."

Women are naturally equipped with the necessary tools of intellect and talent need for their authenticated existence in the world. They form over half of the population of the world, vouchsafing recognition to their efforts and bestowing encouragement to their participation are among the sensible and rational solutions to the economic and ethical problems of the world today.

2. Literature Review

Adrienne Rich was a radical feminist and participated actively in the women rights movement of the 1970. She was an influential contemporary poetess and essayist. Due to entrenched ideology and patriarchal trends, women were facing problems at workplaces. Moreover, their capacities and achievements were belittled by the patriarchal attitudes prevalent in her society. Rich's writing was not only able to express her feminist ideas but she also endeavored to highlight the women's need for unity and solidarity. Her poetry was an 'instrument' to change and carve new female identity in opposition to the prevalent attitudes towards women of her times. The poem "Planetarium" is included in her poetic collection *The Will to Change* written during the period of 1968-1970, a time when Rich was facing hard times in her domestic life. But she continued to forcefully articulate her views with regard to women position in society. In her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," written for the MLA Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession in 1971, Rich states that in "Planetarium" it is the first time she identifies with the persona in a poem (25)

Rich's seventh poetic collection *Diving in The Wreck: Poems 1971-1972* reflect her decision to recreate women identity at this preparatory stage to make sound difference in women's lives. The poem "Diving in the Wreck" is included in this collection with same name. In this poem she personally undertakes the mission of defining her female position in the patriarchal society. The question Who am I? What is the purpose of my life? pertain

to the realm of Existentialism and Simon de Beauvoir, the feminist existentialist concerns herself with the problems of patriarchy, women's identity, and her position in patriarchal society. She addresses these issues at length in her classic philosophical theory book *The Second Sex (1949)* According to the author [1] "If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through "the eternal feminine," and if nevertheless we admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question: what is a woman? . . . if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say, "I am a woman"; on this truth must be based all further discussion." Simos de Beauvoir's primary thesis is that men fundamentally oppress women by characterizing them, on every level, as the *Other*, defined exclusively in opposition to men. The author [1] said, "man put himself forward as the Subject and considered the woman as an object, as the Other". Women are not in minority like the other oppressed minority groups. According to her, "[T]he whole of feminine history has been man-made. Just as in America there is no Negro problem, but rather a white problem; just as anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem, it is our problem; so the woman problem has always been a man problem."

The natural process of humans of understanding themselves in opposition to others becomes flawed when we apply it to the genders. The source of these imbalanced gender roles is located in the various mythical representations of women, and these myths have imprinted human consciousness. She believes that the persistent myth of the 'eternal feminine', rob woman off her individuality by transforming her into a symbol of "life" and fertility. Women are not *born* "feminine" but shaped by external social forces, they deprive them of their subjectivity and transform them into an object. This causes frustration in the women. They are confined within the roles of childbearing, mother and sexual entertainer. Denying any possibility of creative and artistic growth. Beauvoir claims, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Woman's complacency, lack of accomplishment, passivity are the *consequences* of her subordination, and are not the cause itself. She believes that women are responsible for their situation because of their compliance with it. Simon de Beauvoir writes, "If the definition provided for this concept [of the eternal feminine] is contradicted by the behavior of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong: we are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine." Women's subjugation and subordination is further aggravated by her economic dependency on men, she believes. Women can achieve a form of liberation by working and earning for themselves. Beauvoir writes that, "[W]oman enjoys that incomparable privilege: irresponsibility." It is less demanding and easy to abdicate all responsibility for one's future to a man. She upholds the idea that any fruitful relationship between two parties grows from mutual liberty. Irresponsibility, reduces women to a status of mutilation and incompleteness, subjugation and dependency.

There is a contradiction between woman's vocation as a human and her "destiny" as a female. Women who refuse to be passive, elegant, and silent, are called defective, unattractive, and unfeminine. They are "not real women," and they are punished for putting their humanity before their femininity. According to Beauvoir the problem is not the individual woman, but the complex mythology that imprisons her. If the "definition" of femininity is undermined by the behavior of "flesh-and-blood women," perhaps the definition is the problem, not the women.

3. Research Methodology

The study is a qualitative cum analytical research and is toggled by Simon de Beauvoir theoretical framework of existentialist feminism. The primary text of the study is Adrienne rich's Poems "*Diving into the Wreck*" and "*Planetarium*". Simon de Beauvoir's "*The Second Sex*." and articles form the secondary text of the study.

4. Delimitation of the Study

The study is delimited to Beauvoir's existentialist feminism analysis of the chosen poems. It aims to explore the role of patriarchal myth in the construction and commodification of female. Moreover, the study seeks to find acceptance and recognition for women in society by for their contribution in its progress and development.

5. Discussion and Analysis

The 'Subaltern bodies' mentioned in the title are given voice by Rich in her poem "Planetarium." The poem opens with the line "A woman in the shape of a monster/a monster in the shape of a woman/ the skies are full of them" (1-3) Society deplores such women who do not conform to their gendered roles. Such women are looked down upon as monsters. Women who deny and refuse to be submissive according to the author [3] are, "the problem that has no name,". Rich uses the words 'praying mantis' [1] to refer to women's frustration at getting no time to nurture their intellectual skills, due to their engagement in household tasks and child bearing responsibilities. They are like the insect who gnaw their partner after intercourse. According to the patriarchal norms they fail to conform to be the 'eternal feminine' as de Beauvoir identifies them. Patriarchal archetype of 'eternal woman, leaves no room for the creative and intellectual growth of women. Their energies are damped and their intellectual voices are 'silenced'.

These 'Subaltern bodies' occupy the 'fluid space of a female body'. Female body, according to Rich, is an 'armor' which carries both female and male tendencies within it, realizing it women are capable of inscribing new geography for their 'female body'. Rich sees herself and all women as an "instrument in the shape/of a woman" (42-43) She is charged with the will to change things for women in the society. She writes, "what we see, we see, and seeing is changing" (27) The author [1] regards women's complacency to the prejudiced social system as the result of their own shortcomings. "[W]oman enjoys that incomparable privilege: irresponsibility." It is less demanding and easy to abdicate all responsibility for one's future to a man. Rich also invites women to stand up for their rights and make their voices 'heard' with unity and steadfastness. The author [6] "we are not the woman question, we are the women who ask questions."

The patriarchal system regards women as 'subaltern', and according to Freud not fit for any 'higher tasks'. The author [2] writes although, "an individual woman may be a human being in other respects as well" one must remember Freud warns that "their nature is determined by their sexual function" and that "that influence extends very far." The adherents of patriarchy condemn women capacities and shove their achievements to oblivion. "Planetarium" was inspired by the figure of the astronomer, Caroline Herschel, sister of a renowned astronomer, William Herschel. Her hard work and achievements were eclipsed by her brother's recognition in the male chauvinistic society. The author [10] interprets the poetess's use of patriarchal language in the poem as

indicative of her resentment and hatred of this male domineering attitude. "I am bombarded yet I stand/ I have been standing all my life in the /direct path of a battery of signals/ the most accurately transmitted most/untranslatable language in the Universe" (34-38)

"Planetarium" which is an artificial place, created by men. But it depends on the perspective you take on life. Even within the enclosed space of, 'Planetarium' women can find their own galaxies and cosmos. There is water, there is space, universe is there to help her to find new paths, new galaxies for her female self. She lets herself drawn by the element 'in her. Like the persona who in 'Surfacing' went into the lake and when she came out, she came out empowered by knowledge of her female self.

Although planetarium is an artificial, confined, manmade space, but it opens new vistas of horizons for the viewer. The fluid space of female body is like a planetarium. Here boundaries are blurred and even though it is a space confined by patriarchal myth, it has its own galaxies and own entities of female and male consciousness floating within it. Female need to change their perspective of looking at things. Rich invites women to participate actively by delving deep into their women experiences, their vision blurred by any patriarchal myth, for the rebirth of their female identity. This, according to Rich will lead to the, "relief of the body/ and the reconstruction of the mind" (44-45)

The poem '*Diving into the Wreck*' reverberates with an image of revitalization and mirrors Rich's attempt to redefine the female position, in terms of a new feminist framework. According to the author [1] if we believe provisionally, "that women do exist, then we must face the question: what is a woman? . . . if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say, "I am a woman"; on this truth must be based all further discussion." The poem unfolds an experience which is individual as well as collective. Women must dive into the wreck, which symbolizes past experiences and history of woman. Riche gives importance to the past in the redefinition of female identity. According to Rich in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction-is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival" (18).

Self-awareness includes both defining your position and resisting the patriarchal norms set for female gender. Myth of patriarchy governs female existence in the society. The author [3] views, "Myths are the world's dreams. They are archetypal dreams and deal with the problems of life." Man attempts to subjugate women through the prejudiced gendered role of woman. The author [1] said, "man put himself forward as the Subject and considered the woman as an object, as the Other". Rich envisions in her poem a persona with both female and male attributes defining herself as "the mermaid whose dark hair/streams black, the merman in his armored body" (71-72). In the poem the author [4] writes, notions which seem to be contradictory, such as subject and object and female and male, are brought together. In this way, it becomes clear that the conflict between male and female will gradually fade out and both of them will start to act as one. For Rich, it is the last time she tries to merge female and male characteristics within the same entity in her attempt to define female identity. [5] With the fusion of female and male characteristics within the new female identity opens up new outlooks for a society where women will be at freedom to create their future without any restrictions. Woman's complacency, lack of accomplishment, passivity are the *consequences* of her subordination, and are not the cause itself. "One

is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” [1]

Carl Gustav Jung’s archetypes of anima and animus follow the patriarchal myth. Rich also talking about these archetypes in her poem. Whatever has been instilled in our unconscious is now coming out in our conscious as the form of wreck. Wreck stands for not just one person’s life as a wreck, Rich is talking about the collective experience of women. The whole idea that a woman is asked to dive into the wreck, and the belief that only a woman can manage the wreck better, resounds with Rich’s belief that women by probing deep into their experiences women can attain their new identity. The explorer here initially starts off as a woman, but later on she is I am she, I am he; changes her gender, she is all. She has been asked to go down to explore. She has done it before, because myth says so. It has come down to her as archetypal myth. (ancestral values) and they become part of your psyche. They become part of their unconscious as well, the collective unconscious. Because all women can think like this, regardless where they are from, regardless what their individual experiences have been. Even if you are not a woman, because the persona keeps saying I am ‘he’ also. Rich has blurred the boundaries she has blurred the identities. Diving in to the wreck, diving is symbolic. Anything you diving into, delving into, to explore.

In order to define her position of woman she undertakes to dive into her own subconscious metaphorically. According to author [7] she comes to know about her lesbianism in the process, of which she was ignorant all her adolescent years. She accepts it courageously, even though she is called vehemently a ‘sexual switch’ by her close friend Carruth, when she acknowledges this aspect of her female self to him. But this realization about herself empowered her, and this influenced her entire life afterwards. She emerges as a different person, who fuses both female and male consciousness, which occupy the fluid space of her female body. Like the protagonist of the author [6] of *Surfacing* who when emerges out of the lake, equipped with new knowledge about herself, comes out as an empowered person. Women are equipped naturally with the necessary tools for the excavation of their true female identity, from the wreck of their past experiences. The explorer is equipped with the gear, oxygen, powerful diving masks and the lamp. After first having read the book of myths, and loading the camera, in her ‘armor’ woman body, she dives into the sea. She is wearing a mask. Whatever mask there is, whatever persona that you to put on, it is there for you to breathe and live and find solution. But it is ‘awkward mask’. There is reference the male explorer who had his team with him while exploring, but she is doing it alone. And in her loneliness has taken all the women with her. All become part of her experience. It is intended to be exclusively a woman experience, they have to dive and search for the ‘wreck’ symbolic of women past experiences.

Adrian Rich believes, “poetry can break isolation, show us to ourselves when we are outlawed or made invisible, remind us of beauty when no beauty seems possible, remind us of kinship where all is represented as separation.” Rich has also made the reader also to experience the individual person’s experience of self-discovery. Like “some schooner ...” You are leaving the comfort of the schooner and diving deep into the darkness of it. In doing so not only the women are going through experience but the men are also going through the experience. They are also experiencing what a human being goes through. Women make up for over half of the world population. Rich through her poetry is striving to unite women in their experience of womanhood and is aspiring for the respectable solution of the problems erected by men. According to the author [1] “[T]he

whole of feminine history has been man-made. Just as in America there is no Negro problem, but rather a white problem; just as anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem, it is our problem; so the woman problem has always been a man problem.”

We along with the persona delve deep down into the wreck, leaving behind all the myths and maps drawn by others, to find our own place in the world. It is a rather very existential search. But women are equipped with necessary tools for this journey. Only women themselves can perform this hazardous diving into the wreck of their past and can find out about the damage done by the patriarchal social forces to the ‘ship’ of female self. Our woman body is an armor, it is not fragile. We also have the ‘lamp’ of our intellect. So it’s a journey of life from outside to inside towards the Self. “I go down....” So she is taking the ladder to go down, not just up. “The oxygen immerses me.... human air”. The persona is actually delving into herself, into the unknown, in such a manner that she is not in sync with that environment.

“I crawled down and there is no one to tell me when the ocean will begin.’ Space, that she is going to occupy and now end up is completely unknown to her and there is nobody to guide her. There is an existentialist talk as well. She has to go reach that level that she goes inside the ocean. And again how deep is it, where will it begin and the whole idea of it and there is no one to guide her. She is diving in to find the answers about existence. Who am I? Why am I here? What is the purpose of my stay here? These are very existentialist questions. The book of myths, of social and gender constructs do not give her answers for these questions. Her name is not written in this book of myths. Because women were given ‘fouled compass’ by the patriarchy, and ‘our ship’ has lost its way due to this. As human we fell and but now women are determined to look into the wreck which was also laden with ‘treasures’. She has the equipment. Outwardly she is prepared. She does not know when she has to use it. Stylistically, “First the air is blue and then it’s the sea, it 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 elements.” there is no full stop in these lines. Women cannot find meaning of their space, their location, they have to keep locating that space. Because the world has made it into a means of politics, women have to find their space. They cannot let go of their space. If it were not a matter of politics, just persona, it would not have matter because women have their space inside. But what women need is to have an outward space as well. Woman as an explorer has to go down. She has the powerful persona to help her to take her down, that will be there to keep her alive. The oxygen is there to keep her alive. It’s borderless down there. Demarcations and differences are manmade. Male and female are biologically determined, but man and woman differences are gendered. The fluid space within female body, occupied by both sexes male and female, are there to give ourselves a mark of our individuality. Accepting and recognizing both and their capacities help women in realizing their true identity. All of a sudden all of the force gone. You just follow. You don’t have to use force to do something. Because it happens voluntarily. Because of the whole atmosphere of the water. “And now it is easy to forget what I came for...” Now she is among those people, all those elements, all those men, females, humans all the aquatic life in one, who have been here on this planet. Now she has connected herself. Tagore advocated that all humans are connected in their cells., at the stage of cell we are all linked. Hence you and I are the same because we are the same cell. It also means that historically we are connected, as Man. “She came here alone, all the feminine consciousness, the male consciousness, the cave man, Man, aquatic life, universe, atmosphere, ‘we’ (becomes that collective ‘we’). This poem has a very evolutionary impact. She takes us all in.

Not because the myth says so. It's because of the fact that we are all human. "We circle..." "I am she: I am he." The author [6] has made use of her stylistics technique to augment her female subjective stance. She has used colon and has not used coma. This allows her to lead out to "I am he", and full stop. 'I am he' it is part of me. It is biological element. She is not only connecting she with he, she is also connecting the explorer, because when you dive down you cannot determine, whether it's a man or a woman. It's just an explorer. But she does distinguish between man and woman to us. As a ship we were on the course, right course. But we fell, as humans we fell and we drowned. We did not find our way because the 'compass's fouled. We could not find the right way. Hence we had to go down. It was laden with treasures, it was heavy. That is why it drowned. Women are laden with their female power and capacities, and they made their achievements also in the past like the astronomer Catherine Herschell's feats of excellence, but due to 'fouled compass' of our 'ship' handed down to us by the patriarchal system we got drowned with all our abilities and laurels in the sea of oblivion as the 'subaltern bodies'.

We are, I am, You are, All of us' We drowned. But we have to find a way to go back, we have to define our woman position ourselves and carve our names in the book of myths, 'Carrying knife, a camera and book of myth in which our names do not appear'. Not depending on any myth because, "All the myths that have been passed own to us, we have been given. That is what making us not find our way. Our names do not appear in them. We carve our own names. We have to find this place. Book of myths, of cultural constructs, social constructs. The poem started very exclusive with one, later one Inclusive with all,' I 'say move to 'we' and 'you' as well. 'you' meaning, it is giving you individuality. And the camera is there to take picture, take them forever. A retention of the wreck. It is always going to be there. Something she can show to others also. You have camera, you have memories. You will carry memory with you. It is always other, 'we, you, and 'I' you want to show. That there is a wreck down there. She is now going to create a new myth as well.

It is a world where the balance is around the center and the center is man. Rich, embraces the fact of her lesbian self, after diving into sea of her unconscious. Therefore, the partnership she has, there is the element of he and she. The person who is the 'he' in relationship is also the 'she'. The blurring of the boundaries is important. She is just blurring the boundaries, rather to than just locate herself within the he or she, she has located herself within both. It's not between both but within both. Nature has given us body, and what we do with it is nurture. Defining of roles is not sex oriented but they are gender oriented. Recognition and acceptance of the natural impulses, power and capacities and 'hearing' the 'subaltern bodies in the fluid space of female body' can lead to the birth of new female identity. The author [3] quoted a Japanese Shinto in his book, *The Power of Myth* "Every natural impulse is not to be corrected but to be sublimated, to be beautified."

6. Conclusion

The sum up 'subaltern bodies' which occupy the 'fluid space of female body' are in fact the congealed energies of feminine and masculine unconscious which, when invested independent of patriarchal mythical constructions of self, accumulate to form an energetic, different but unique female/male identity. This study concludes that although patriarchal myth is used to commodify female self, woman in postmodern era, laced with modern knowledge, and by employing their skills and natural talents have created for themselves an identity of a woman

who believes in myths of indomitable courage, sincerity and love. She is a woman who believes that, “Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life.”[3]

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