9 Adrienne Rich and the Academic Re-Vision

Understanding Othering and Tokenism in Academic Spaces

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Abstract

This paper explores the idea of the "Other" as illustrated by Adrienne Rich in some of her speeches such as "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1971), "Claiming an Education" (1977), "Taking Women Students Seriously" (1978) and "What does a Woman Need to Know" (1979). It contextualises her speeches with her service as an instructor in the SEEK (Search for Knowledge, Education, and Power) Program. Through a close analysis of these works, this paper examines how Rich identifies herself and her audience, which chiefly consists of young female scholars, as outsiders in predominantly masculine institutions. This recognition of their "otherness" allows them to resist the discrimination that is vetted out to them. The paper also undertakes a symptomatic study of some of her poems such as "Planetarium"(1971), "Diving into the Wreck"(1973), and "Power"(1978), to further elucidate how women who make into the typically masculine edifices are often forced into giving up their identity and are homogenised as "special women" which leads to a rupture in their relationship with the other women who are largely identified as being less qualified or less worthy. The paper underscores Rich's contribution to raising awareness about female tokenism and the importance of solidarity among all those who have been marginalised to resist systemic bias in a patriarchal system.

Keywords

- Adrienne Rich
- The Other
- Feminist discourse
- Female tokenism

Introduction

Adrienne Rich is a key voice in the post-World War II feminist movement. She was a poet and activist "[who] spoke passionately for women and more specifically, for lesbians, for black women, for working-class women, for Jews and in a larger sense for the dispossessed" (Gilbert, 8). She was also a distinguished academic who understood the biases that women face in traditionally male-dominated spaces. This paper will examine some of her essays and poems to understand how women are othered and tokenized within higher education, both as students and as academics. Rich encourages young women to reclaim their identity and voice by first redefining their position as an Other who has agency and then re-envisioning their role as active participants in reshaping academic culture. This tripartite approach to understanding Rich's feminism provides a model for young women to challenge and transform these institutions from within.

Rich graduated from Radcliffe College — then considered the "Harvard for Women" — and for a few years taught in equally prestigious colleges. However, in 1968, she joined the Search for Knowledge, Education and Power program, established at the City University of New York which aimed to democratise education for economically, racially, and educationally disadvantaged students. She defines her motivation as being "complex," as she was "acting out of white liberal guilt...a political decision to use her energies in work with 'disadvantaged' students and a need to engage with the real life of the city" (Teaching Language in Open Admissions 42). Meanwhile, she experienced a constant conflict with her own identity — "a white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, once married, lesbian, middle-class, feminist, expatriate southerner, split at the root" (Split at the Root 101). This self-reflection reveals her lifelong feeling of being an outsider and a constant struggle to reconcile different facets of her identity. Victor Luftig observes that "she claimed both the 'eye of the outsider' and the half-desired verbal privilege of one whose words are found responsible" (6). This position allowed Rich to align herself with the "Others" of the society while also enabling her to adopt "a more collective, activist pedagogy, inspired by movements for anti-imperialism, racial justice, and women's liberation" (Savonick 306) to address gender-based discrimination that often goes unnoticed in academia. Her dual perspective helps shape her critique of the system and provides a solution that is rooted in language as a means of empowerment.

The Outsider

For the longest time, women have played the role of a man's subject. They are often presented as a "painter's model, a poet's muse" and are given the stereotypical roles of the "comforter, nurse, cook, assistant and [ultimately] the bearer of a man's seed" (When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision 29). These are tasks limited to the private sphere which have always been seen as secondary and less valuable. So when, after a significant number of social movements, women first entered mainstream academic spaces, their position was of someone who did not completely belong there and was only allowed in because those in power deemed it so. In her essay "The Antifeminist Woman" (1972), Rich points out that

when "a few, mostly white middle-class, women [are given] token equality, in the form of permission to attend professional school…" (68), it is still under the supervision of a patriarchal system which dictates what roles they are allowed or not allowed to play.

In "Claiming an Education" (1977), Rich calls attention to the reality of how these "special" women are treated in the institutions where they are eroticised by several male professors and often treated as sexual objects. Aisenberg and Harington claim that women are mere outsiders in the Sacred Grove which is the mainstream academic space. Their study shows that even though women are entering professional lines, they do not attain full professional authority (22). They also found out that women at the top professional ranks hold positions at teaching colleges and not research institutes which is indicative of the fact that they are still far away from being at the heart of academic knowledge production.

Despite the systemic disadvantages if some women do succeed in making a place for themselves, their achievements are often sidelined or forgotten. In her poem Planetarium (1971), Rich talks about the achievements of Caroline Herschel, the first woman to have been admitted into the Royal Astronomical Society – the era's most prestigious scientific institution. In her lifetime she discovered eight comets, including the 35P/Herschel-Rigollet. Yet in the poem's dedication, Rich qualifies Herschel as the "sister of William." He was also a fellow astronomer yet Catherine's identity seems to be permanently attached to his and her achievements forever seen as a joint effort between the two.

According to Janna Levin, the poem also references Jocelyn Bell, a 23-year-old astronomer who discovered the first pulsar in 1967 which revolutionised the understanding of the universe but was excluded from the Nobel Prize awarded for this discovery. The women in the poem are portrayed as monsters for having given up traditional roles and instead choosing to work in masculine institutions – "in the snow among the Clocks and instruments or measuring the grounds with poles."

The othering that they face is a price they have to pay for abandoning their true roles – a "penance for impetuousness." The women remain perpetually marginalised and their identity becomes inextricably tied to the reality that their presence in these academic spheres is a result of a "benevolent" system and the men who are at its helm.

The Token

Academic institutions attempt to address the issues of marginalisation by way of affirmative action and by establishing departments dedicated to different races, gender, and ethnicity. But, as Danica Savonick notes, on the surface these departments "incorporated the [social] movements' insurrectionary aspirations but ignored their demands for collective material redistribution" (311). This means that since the system only parodied inclusivity and failed to address the biases inherent in itself, those who were "allowed" in, remained as outsiders. Yolanda Niemann's experience as a woman of colour in academia illustrates how belonging to a particular community made her peers undermine her skills as a scholar and she was reduced to being a "token minority." In 1977, Rosabeth Moss Kanter conducted a study to understand the effect of tokenism in the workplace and how it can lead to heightened

visibility and intensified pressure on minority groups. Subsequent studies revealed that women in traditionally masculine spaces are more prone to these marginalizations than men in female-dominated spaces. Niemann describes this as a double-edged sword that provided "simultaneously a perverse visibility and a convenient invisibility" (10).

> "Once tagged as an affirmative action hire, colleagues may discount the qualification of the hiree and assume she was selected primarily because of her minority status thus leading to presumption and stigma of incompetence" (4).

Rich's 1977 poem "Power" is a tribute to Marie Curie, one of the most influential scientists of all time. Her groundbreaking work, which won her the Nobel Prize in Physics and Chemistry, was at the cost of her physical health– "her body bombarded for years by the element she had purified". She denied the source of her deteriorating health until "she could no longer hold a test tube or a pencil." Her awareness of her position as a woman in a field of men can be assumed to be one reason why she chose to work until the last possible moments of her life rather than giving into her illness. Even though one of the greatest scientists ever, she could not risk being seen as weak and thus allowing anyone to question her achievements. Her power came from her exemplary position in a man's world, but the perverse visibility of that very position became the reason for her demise.

As a result of this, women tend to face even greater harm when institutions overlook their outsider status as per their ease and treat them as equals in a system that is gender-blind only on the surface. In addition to these, Rich believes that patriarchal structures use tokenism to create a myth of the special woman–

> "We seem to be special women here, we have liked to think of ourselves as special, and we have known that men would tolerate, even romanticise us as special, as long as our words and actions do not threaten their privilege of tolerating or rejecting us and our work according to their idea of what a special woman ought to be" (When We Dead Awaken 30).

Consequently, this bestowed speciality works to create discord between the women who make it into the Sacred Grove and those who do not. In "What Does a Woman Need to Know" (1979), she urges women to recognise that the position of privilege they hold in these institutions is a result of the education that they have received, everything that they have learnt has been in the "ideology of white male supremacy and a construct of male subjectivity" (12). Tokenism bestows false power on them who are then perceived by "ordinary women as separate [and] perhaps even stronger than themselves" (14) but in reality "no woman can [ever] be an insider in the institutions fathered by masculine consciousness" (15). Tokenism thus becomes a way for institutions to both undermine their minorities and also put up a facade of inclusivity. This also allows them to "feed into the myth of meritocracy or the idea that if one simply works hard enough, irrespective of their condition, one can achieve anything. (Ruby 722). All of this jeopardises the identity of the special women because they find themselves caught between their identity as a scholar or

an academic and that of a woman who needs to be mindful of all the women who have come before her and the ones she might be leaving behind.

Furthermore, a woman's marginalisation is amplified as female scholars are often delegated to the areas of Women's Studies. This becomes the only way that women's stories are allowed to enter the academic space. Rich defines it as a "precariously budgeted, much condescended" area that can only be classified as "self-indulgence, soft-core education" as opposed to the "real learning in the study of Mankind" (Taking Women Students Seriously 213). Niemann echoes a similar concern when she notes that minority scholars are often asked to take on classes that teach about diversity even if it is beyond their scholarly area of expertise or a white colleague may put their name on a grant or proposal that requires an emphasis on diversity with or without their permission. This goes to show that the speciality that is conferred upon these individuals is not just a token position but built to suit the system where they are reduced to being figureheads for their representative group and any other aspect of their identity is systematically erased.

The Re-Vision

Academic institutions continue to function as exclusionary spaces. Rich realises that the only way women can claim their rightful spot in these places is when they do not just try to shed the identity of an outsider but reclaim it and use it to formulate their tradition which is rooted in the legacy of the women who came before them. But Virginia Woolf in "A Room of One's Own" (1929) imagines that in the past "any woman born with a great gift would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at" (43). This results in the lack of a distinct female canon and tradition which further prevents women from taking control of their narrative. Women have not just been discriminated against but any attempt they undertake to overcome this or to voice their opinions has been systematically shunned, silenced, and erased. This further reinforces their othering by fostering alienation in the community and within themselves.

> "One serious cultural obstacle encountered by any feminist writer is that each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere; as if each of us had lived, thought, and worked without any historical past or contextual present. This is one of how women's work and thinking has been made to seem sporadic, errant, orphaned of any tradition of its own" (On Lies, Secrets and Silences 6).

Rich points out that until now women have only been offered the "models of self-denying wife and mother; intellectual models of the brilliant but slapdash dilettante who never commits herself to anything or the intelligent woman who denies her intelligence to seem more feminine" (Claiming an Education 207). Extraordinary women are thus kept in check by the system which has led to a complete erasure of their experiences and thoughts. Her poem "Diving into the Wreck" (1973) can be read as a metaphor for a woman's search for their "stories" and not just their "myth". In the poem the speaker enters the wreck, of a presumably patriarchal institution, alone unlike "Cousteau with his assiduous team"

underlining how women often have little to no support system when they venture into something new. Even though there is a ladder present she seems sceptical about its usefulness for she defines it as" a piece of maritime floss- some sundry equipment." She has no formal supervision- no one to tell her "when the ocean will begin." Yet, this conscious act of reviewing and rewriting women's history becomes indispensable to her objective of creating a new tradition. Only when she dives into the wreck of the language and peers into the "book of myths in which [their] names do not appear" can she find the way to start anew.

It becomes evident that language plays the greatest role in maintaining the bias against women. Rich points out that at present the construction of knowledge is masculine thus "[it] burns into the brains of little girls and young women a message that male is the norm, the standard, the central figure beside which [they] are the deviants, the marginals, the dependent variables" (Taking Women 214). Thus, to create an identity which is more than just "the other, the defined, the object or the victim" they need to utilise this very language which has been used to push them towards the margins. She suggests that individuals can "begin to describe and analyse themselves as they cease to identify with the dominant culture" by using language for themselves. This means "not simply learning the jargon of the elite, fitting unexceptionally into the status quo but learning that language can be a means of changing reality" (Friere, qtd. in Teaching Language 57). She coins the term Re-Vision and defines it as an awakening of dead or sleeping consciousness which should allow women to look back and see with fresh eyes, an old text from a new critical direction (When We Dead Awaken 28). This argument aligns with Elaine Showalter's proposition in "Towards a Feminist Criticism" (1979) where she emphasises a need to "construct a female framework" and "develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories" (217). Yet a lot of theorists raise the question if a quintessentially feminine style of writing will "reassert the [stereotype of] feminine as being irrational, intuitive, and intense", reinforcing the belief that a feminine style of writing does not automatically become feminist (Belsey 2). But these assertions fail to acknowledge the challenges that women tend to face in academic environments which furthers the doctrine that scientific, positivistic, and objective language is the only acceptable language for academia. Olivia Frey notes that the conventions of mainstream literary convention can not be feminist.

> "These conventions include the use of argument as the preferred mode of discussion, the importance of the objective and impersonal, the importance of the finished product without direct references to the process by which it was accomplished, and the necessity of being thorough to establish proof and reach a definitive conclusion" (4).

She believes that even though there are women who thrive in these systems yet it can not be denied that there are significantly more women than men who feel overwhelmed by how antagonising traditional academic spaces can be. In such a situation, Rich's proposition is of an androgyne language that takes inspiration from both the masculine and feminine traditions. In *Diving into the Wreck* she states, "We circle silently / about the wreck / we dive into the hold. / I am she: I am he". To find a balance between female subjectivity and

masculine universality, Rich recommends an amalgamation of both. Alice Templeton refers to this as Dialogic Poetics where the "individual imagination is complicated by political and social considerations" (3). The dialogic language allows women to be equal participants in the construction of meaning as writers as well as readers. This is because-

> "The dialogue exposes destructive power relations and ideologies. It discloses the multiple possibilities for interpretation and action, which are concealed by reductive ideologies that appear to finalise meaning" (5).

This method seems to work towards creating a language that allows women to associate with their past and present while also being true to their lived experiences. This revision of language is a significant act of agency which is an essential first step in rising above the identity of an outsider and using it to establish their tradition. Academic institutes do not just need to lose the stigma of being elitist and antagonising, they also need to become inclusive in the truest sense. This can happen when the token outsiders are not just limited to a niche but can work towards bringing long-term, holistic changes by becoming invaluable members.

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