

## **Woman-defined Identity: Analysis of Selected Poems of Adrienne Rich**

**Done by:** Mahsa Maneshi M.A student of English Literature

Vali-e-Asr University of Rafsanjan, Iran

**Under the Supervision of:** Dr. Soheila Faghfori and Dr. Anita Lashkarian

### **Abstract:**

This paper targets to analyze the selected poems of Adrienne Rich through a psychological perspective. The confessional style of the poet in these works has created an atmosphere in which the description of a woman's self-portrait seems plausible. Also, the fragmentary nature of her post-modernist poetry, discordant lines deprived of meter along with the cinematic jumps or cuts, impulsiveness and ambiguity of her style which makes the poems difficult to understand are representations of the confounded soul of woman who have been detached from their very essence of being and strives to regain their lost voice in words. To unravel the underlying factors in the systematization of a woman's thoughts, a close examination of their unconscious reservoir needs to be applied. In order to fulfill this purpose, the Austrian-born Heinz Kohut (1931-1891)'s practices are used to investigate the formation of Self and its later development. It is supposed that an individual's very essence of being is formed by their biological parents and then transformed and transcended/descended by the environmental causes into a distinctly unique complexity. However, sociological studies moving alongside psychological surveys of individuals indicate that the way one's eventual personality-wiring is defined proves to be exceedingly time-related and prone to alterations owing to time-relevant standards and values prevailing in each era.

**Key Words:** Adrienne Rich, Identity, Heinz Kohut, and Narcissism

Identity, a significant concept of contemporary literature, has been discussed and delineated by many and various scholars since classic eras in different genres of literary writings. It is conjectured to be a multi-faceted issue for firstly, it is mostly interblended with the sphere of "self", and secondly, encompasses cultural, economic, and gender factors- highly prone to change with the passage of times- that inevitably help it form and develop. Nonetheless, for its being subjective, researcher might have been able to find lesser traces of the issue and its development in the fields of poetry, let alone in women's writings whose voices have been broadsided by the main dominant figures of the canon as male authors. Specifically speaking, from Coventry Kersey Dighton Patmore (1823-1896) to Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) there have been talks of feminist literary movements and recreation of womanhood in alternative tones in literature.

Since human achievements are prone to imperfection and defect, the urge to fill the void turns the readers' eyes towards this influential recent poet Adrienne Rich (1929 – 2012) who attempts to remove the excruciating prejudice against women- whatever their roles as mother, daughter, or wife might be- that is still lurking

beneath the surface of human beings' mentality. In these selected poems under analysis, she becomes the voice of a silenced woman, far away from home where the her spirit resides, forsaken and desolated, shrieking fearlessly and seeking regeneration and revivification of life; the poems reecho the aches and pains of suffering women whose identities would be defined by the standards of ill societies, whether they be Capitalist, Marxist or whatsoever.

In other words, they represent the confounded soul of a woman who has been detached from her very essence of being and strives to regain her lost voice in words; As Hélène Cixous approves: "First, I sense femininity in writing by: a privilege of voice: voice and writing are entwined and interwoven and writings continuity/voice's rhythm take each other's breath away through interchanging, makes the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries". (Cixous)

In a very recent research in the Journal of Poetry Therapy in Dec 2011 points out the therapeutic and political aspects of Rich's poetry through the recurring addressing of a "you". (Glaser) Such technique on the behalf of the poet reinforces the sense of identity and purpose. Glaser, thus, concluded that the reader sought in the works cannot be any ordinary person, but are the American warriors, broadsided women and victims of AIDS in her "poetic community". To Adrienne Rich, poetry paves the way to "justice"; it is not a simple mirror held up to the imperfections of the society. By picturing war, which is an integral feature of patriarchy, and expressing her animosity towards that, Rich yearns for a more pacific nation. On the other hand, the very personal voice, fundamental to her art, strives to obtain those ideals (either in politics or domestic environment) is targeted at a "you" which is counted as an idol of ambition.

Moving in rather the same direction, this paper is to determine the ways the poet's personality, in particular the narrator of the poems, has been affected by the psychological factors as well as environmental ones with extra emphasis on the poet's gender, which is a critical facet of one's identity. The upcoming questions would consider the poet's lack of self-cohesion due to the unfulfilled psychological needs that underlie all this complexity of her soul as well as the cultural or social factors' role in the dissatisfaction of the poet's self-object needs. In order to reach the desirable results, Kohutian methodology to search the Self is applied and intensified by the postmodernist theories of a host of scholars interrogating the development and growth of the Self in contemporary civilizations.

At the heart of Kohutian framework lies the theory of "Introspection and Empathy", through which the psychoanalyst ferrets a way into an individual's inner world or unconscious. He posits:

*"The inner world cannot be observed with the aid of our sensory organs. Our thoughts, wishes, feelings, and fantasies cannot be seen, smelled, heard, or touched. They have no existence in physical space, and yet they are real, and we can observe them as they occur in time: through introspection in ourselves, and through empathy (i.e., vicarious introspection) in others." (Kohut Selected Writings of Kohut)*

This is self-introspection on the side of the poet which is framed in the metaphorical language of “*Diving into the Wreck*” which is read as follows:

*...I am having to do this*  
*Not like Cousteau with his*  
*assiduous team*  
*abroad the sun-flooded schooner*  
*but here alone....*  
*There is a ladder*  
*The ladder is always there*  
*Hanging innocently*  
*Close to the side of the schooner.*  
*I go down.*  
*Rung after rung and still*  
*The oxygen immerses me*  
*the blue light*  
*the clear atoms*  
*of our human air.*

This regression of libido or self-analysis is also cited in several other poems, where the poet represents a flashback to her past experiences like in *Orion*:

*Far back when I went zig-zagging*  
*Through tamarack pastures...*

Psychology says that one's very personality is shaped and designed from the time one is born and exposed to the private causes of family surroundings; however, family itself is a smaller unit of the society of human beings which is controlled and regulated according to special civil, cultural, religious and political laws. That makes an individual's identity the central point of a vast puzzle with the nature of a network: extremely complicated, impossible to be fairly judged, liable to changes and alterations; and in two words absolutely amazing. Seyla Benhabib, a very influential feminist reader of Habermas and Arendt, in her famous book under the

title of *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* writes:

*“The human infant becomes a “self”, a being capable of speech and action, only by learning to interact in a human community. The self becomes an individual in that it becomes a “social” being capable of language, interaction and cognition... and capable of projecting a narrative into the world of which she is not only the author but the actor as well.” (Benhabib)*

Well, in order to initiate the interrogation of the formation of one’s very Self, one needs to access the analysand’s childhood in the first place. According to Kohut, the development of a cohesive self takes place along three axes: (a) the grandiosity axis, (b) the idealization axis, and (c) the alter ego-connectedness axis. The grandiosity axis refers to a person’s ability to maintain a positive and stable sense of self-esteem and develop healthy ambitions. The idealization axis, on the other hand, refers to the development of one’s ability to form and maintain a stable system of goal-oriented attitudes and values. The alter ego-connectedness axis refers to the development of one’s skills to communicate feelings to significant others, form intimate relationships and become a respected part of larger groups. Should any of these three lines be rejected or stopped from a normal development, the individual will lose the sense of integration, cohesion, ambition and assertiveness. Furthermore, it can produce a sense of inner insecurity, resilience and disappointment.

In this regard, the process of self-evolution is accomplished by the interaction of the infant or the young child with self-objects. The concept of self-objects is an important one in Kohut’s terminology. These are objects--people--experienced as part of the self or in the service of the self, and initially they are the parents. Idealization is the other self-object function and requires the parents to allow themselves to be seen as powerful and ideal by the child.

In *Orion*, the reader perceives this model as a powerful selfobject which is internalized in the narrator’s self-image.

*You were my genius, you*

*My cast-iron Viking, my helmed*

*lion-heart king in prison.*

It is now discussible why the woman narrator of Rich’s poems resorts to a male figure as her ideal hero with ultimate powers, as noted in the poem *Orion*. According to E. Hamilton’s *Mythology*, Orion used to be “a young man of gigantic stature and great beauty, and a mighty hunter” whose ill fate doomed him to be transformed into a constellation of the sky in the end. Orion has got the title to be the idealized Kohutian selfobject whom the narrator had been admiring long. Power, his

significant feature, was the magnet with a bipolar quality because for an individual to own power means to deprive others of the same thing.

Rich claims that power, in the patriarchal societies, has been a “primal word and relationship”; the constitution of “identity...of man depends on power...in a certain specific sense: that of power over others, beginning with a woman and her children.” (p.64) and she continues:

*“To hold power over others means that the powerful is permitted a kind of short-cut through the complexity of human personality. He does not have to enter intuitively into the souls of the powerless, or to hear what they are saying in their many languages, including the language of silence...Powerlessness can lead to lassitude, self-negation, guilt and depression; it can also generate a kind of psychological keenness, a shrewdness, an alert and practiced observation of the oppressor-“psyching out” developed into a survival tool.” (Rich)*

She, then, assumes:

*“The idea of power has, for most women, been inextricably linked with maleness, or the use of force; most often with both.” (Rich)*

That clarifies the way such values become internalized in a woman’s soul; or in other words, the selfobjects now instilled develop a person’s subjective experience and finally lead to the development of an inner structure responsible for meeting narcissistic needs and maintaining mental health.

The poem reveals much more as it continues:

*Years later now you are young*

*My fierce half-brother, staring*

*Down from that simplified west*

*Your breast open, your belt dragged down*

*By an old-fashioned thing, a sword*

*The last bravado you won’t give over*

*Though it weighs you sown as you stride*

*And the stars in it are dim*

*And maybe have stopped burning.*

The poet notifies that this internalization has been halted or in other words, the image has been shattered. Throughout the diverse phases of self-maturation and development, there rises up the *narcissistic rage* and its counterpart *sexuality* which Kohut elaborates as the “breakdown products of a [nuclear] self.” Paul H. Ornstein, supposes that narcissistic rage is deduced to be “*the consequence of a mixture of massive discharge and inhibition of aggression in response to frustrated omnipotence which expects perfect control over the functions of the self and total dominance over its selfobjects.*” (Kohut *Selected Writings of Kohut*)

*Indoors I bruise and blunder,*

*Break faith, leave ill enough*

*Alone, a dead child born in the dark.*

*Night cracks up over the chimney,*

*Pieces of time, frozen geodes*

*Come showering down in the grate. (ending lines of Orion)*

On the other hand, a confessional text, like the ones under survey, convey a sense of autobiography, of the memories of a particular writer indulged in with the recollections of the past and struggling to make a connection between the private and public. Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir, a post-modernist theorist and interpreter of women’s writings, categorizes women’s autobiographical creations to three main divisions: “*self-representation, questions of identity (collective versus individual), and the public and the private (male versus female)*”. Unlike other feminist critics which put a distinguishing borderline between men and women’s writing to sect them into polar segments of public/private and male/female authored, she defines the blurry line that moves the women’s works from private to public. In other words, the current feminist discourse, she proves, has a tendency to integrate the delicate borders of fiction and autobiography. Once applied to this research, the images and stories narrated by the poet have got the potentials to be a representation of the author’s private world. A feminist discourse concentrates, to a great deal, on the presence of the mother in the text: the relationship with the mother makes up an enormous albatross which the writer endeavors to release herself from.

In *The Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, the narrator posits various women both in private and public perspectives who have yielded their potentials to the rules and regulations of an unsupportive culture; she addresses them as if they are the mirror of her own soul:

*You, once a belle in Shreveport,*

*with henna-colored hair, skin like a peachbud,  
still have your dresses copied from that time,  
and play a Chopin prelude  
called by Cortot: "Delicious recollections  
float like perfume through the memory."  
Your mind now, moldering like wedding-cake,  
heavy with useless experience, rich  
with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,  
crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge  
of mere fact. In the prime of your life.  
Nervy, glowering, your daughter  
wipes the teaspoons, grows another way.*

In her documentary *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich has begun the opening chapter under the title of "Anger and Tenderness" in which she defines motherhood nothing "*more than rape, prostitution, and slavery*". She elaborates the way the institution of motherhood oscillates a woman- as well as her own- spirit between desperation, self-hatred, unexpressed anger and unconditional tenderness; notwithstanding her natural existence defined as "*impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleeding, dangerous to masculinity, the devil's gateway*" versus the motherhood, seen as her eternal destination, as "*beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, and nourishing*".

Therefore, the institution of motherhood has turned into a prison from which the poet intends to flee away. She confirms:

*"Motherhood calls to mind the home, and we like to believe that the home is a private place...the experts-almost all male- who have told us how, as mothers, we should behave and feel...the psychoanalysts who are certain that the work of motherhood suits us by nature. We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us, in the name of the institution of motherhood."* (Rich)

"Anger" the pivotal factor in the condition of motherhood is depicted as a devastating feeling that entangles a woman's system of thoughts and might obstruct the way to a healthy transaction of positive emotions in her social life. In addition,

this is what Shosana Felman way believes to be the relation of madness, gender and writing in a feminist discourse. She writes:

*“If, in our culture, the woman is by definition associated with madness, her problem is how to break out of this (cultural) imposition of madness without taking up the critical and therapeutic positions of reason: how to avoid speaking both as mad and as not mad. The challenge facing the woman today is nothing less than to “re-invent” language, to re-learn how to speak: to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning.” (Felman)*

Yet, it should be insisted that a woman’s identity is formed by her relationships; social development of women compared to men, in the gender studies, has proved to fall in a different course. Directly speaking, part of women’s identity is their relationship with others. A further explanation on the basis of Douvan & Adelson 1996’s theories asserts, “Boys, [at adolescence stage] formed their identities by making concrete occupational plans, whereas girls’ future plans were unclear—their identity would be shaped by whom they married.” (Hay and Ashman)

Furthermore, Kohut believes:

*“Identity[...] is the point of convergence between the developed self [...] and the sociocultural position of the individual.”(Kohut The Search for the Self)*

The culture factor, then, gains weightier density in this issue. The entire stigma and the biased misperceptions around a woman, ranging from nation, race and social status will push her towards a dangerous game of hide and seek. She would, inevitably, have to deal with and see an unwanted personality hidden from the sight of others and incurable by herself because human beings are social structures whose stability holds firm on the underlying beliefs and values of the civilization they grow in. The current world, investigated on the available facts, sets abusive violent patterns which keeps judging or exerting force without questioning the healthy conditions at present times.

On the other hand, sociology which helps explain the rationality and operational importance of cultures does not see eye to eye with Kohut’s view on a narcissistic nuclear self’s evolution into a whole unity and cohesive entity. Social studies of people in relation with various cultures have shown that such unity is prone to disintegration and disturbance through the time. It confirms that in the adversaries of life when basic familiar staples and standards are defragmented, the unity of an individual would be threatened; therefore, what is gained here would be a relative degree of cohesion and in certain levels of one’s personality. Stephan Fuchs writes:



*“For sociology, “person[s]...are not givens, but variable accomplishments of social orders. They are not simply entities that occur in the world, but come into temporary being as the result of certain kinds of cultural work. Persons and organizations do sometimes appear as unities, but that unity is accomplished and preserved against disorder and incoherence. Unity lasts until further notice, that is, until persons and organizations fall apart or fail... Unity likely breaks down under very stressful and turbulent conditions. Persons... change, and with them their goals, tastes, beliefs, and identities.”(Fuchs)*

A woman is an intuitive being who continuously needs to travel off into the remote places of her soul, like what Adrienne Rich does to find the healer and the teacher there, to step backwards and evaluate the correct use and abuse of power, because in “reappertion” they find the unity and cohesion away from the hues and cries of life; to maintain equilibrium and peace in harmony with the outer world. She would, otherwise, try alternative shortcuts which are neither reasonable nor secure: she would turn into a monstrous warrior battling in mere insanity that ends in her total failure. Examples of these unfortunate extremists are Janis Joplin (1943-1970), the heroine of Jazz Blues music, or Edith Piaf (1915-1963) France’s national diva who finalized themselves overdosing on drugs.

Women need to stay aware and stable for the societies of human beings are dependent on stable pillars of stable identities. Heinz Lichtenstein believes:

*“Loss of identity is a specifically human danger, and maintenance of identity a specifically human necessity”. (Lichtenstein)*

For a woman, though, this is a process which means liberation from the bondage of anger, re-evaluation of her pains and remedies, awareness and acquisition of knowledge, patience in the face of defragmentation, incessant goings through births and deaths of mental lives and invincibility in terms of accepting their vulnerability not for the ordinary reason that they are women but that they deserve love and support both on the internal and external levels for the reason that identity opens, expands; it remains fluid and changing even though confined to a set of scientific definitions.

### **Works Cited:**

1. Cixous, Hélène. *Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways out/Forays*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
2. Felman, Shoshana. "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy." JSTOR, 1975. Print.

3. Fuchs, Stephan. *Against Essentialism: A Theory of Culture and Society*. Harvard University Press, 2001. Print.
4. Glaser, Brian Brodhead. "Blessing and Cursing: Politics and Self-Object Needs in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich." *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 24.4 (2011): 223-37. Print.
5. Hay, Ian, and Adrian F Ashman. "The Development of Adolescents' Emotional Stability and General Self-Concept: The Interplay of Parents, Peers, and Gender." *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* 50.1 (2003): 77-91. Print.
6. Kohut, Heinz. *The Search for the Self*. Vol. Three 2011. Print.
7. ---. *Selected Writings of Kohut*. Vol. one. Print.
8. Lichtenstein, Heinz. "The Dilemma of Human Identity: Notes on Self-Transformation, Self-Objectivation, and Metamorphosis." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 11.1 (1963): 173-223. Print.
9. Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1986. Print.