

Uncovering the Veil of Silence: An Analysis of Adrienne Rich's Poetry

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Abstract

This essay seeks to understand the significance and function of language in the poetry of Adrienne Rich, a twentieth century American poet and prose writer whose radical feminism changed the course of women's writing. Language as given to us is gendered and its manifestation reveals a deep-seated male bias. This has silenced the voice of women, their thoughts, feelings and contribution to society and the arts. It (language) is formed by culture and at the same time it forms and shapes culture. This imparts a paradoxical quality to it, by virtue of which it becomes both a means of liberation and a mode of containment. Adrienne Rich's poetry tries to resist and shake off the 'givens' of patriarchal mores when it realizes that the language available to the poet is the "oppressor's language" (CEP 364)ⁱ which seems woefully inadequate for the task of expressing her feelings and thoughts. This translates into a quest for a language in which the poet can articulate and define her 'self'. In doing so, she breaks the silence that governs the lives of women in general and herself in particular. Her doubts and dilemmas find their way into rough, jagged, uneven language, which is set in truncated structures. This disrupts the normative structures of language and alters the reader's sense of reality. The problematic of using the available gendered language leaves the poet with few options. She cannot invent a new language. She cannot allow it to use her. Its function as a guide to truth is suspect. Instead, she revises the old one in a way that language in her poetry begins to acquire new, original and transformed meanings.

Keywords: language, culture, silence, poetry, patriarchy, gender

Literary language is gendered in such a way that it configures the approval and disapproval of women and men in different spheres of life in ways that are prejudicial to women. Since women have hardly a role to play in social, economic and political formations and organizations, the result is a critical discourse which is male-defined and makes it difficult to acknowledge originality in women writers. If