

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

(Snap)shots of a Daughter-in-Law: Negotiation between “the Energy of Creation and the Energy of Relation”

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Abstract

With the publication of her third volume of poetry, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), Rich demonstrates a significant transition in her poetry and feminist consciousness. Her previous two volumes are not only imitative but also inauthentic and unoriginal. The third volume of poems came after eight year of gap. The reasons for the gap are personal as well as artistic. In these eight years of silence, she was continually struggling with feelings of entrapment, anger, and bitterness that evoked a strong sense of abandoning her artistic self. Her desire to write conflicted with the socially expected roles of a wife and mother. But in her third volume, she skillfully fuses the woman and the poet, the personal and political, and the private and public which initiates her journey to become one of the most influential lesbian-feminist poets and critics. Writing poems that are no longer traditional in theme and structure, the poet began to challenge the existing constraints of society on women. Thus the poems become not merely a medium for containing ideas and thoughts but also for the liberation of the self and womanhood.

Keywords: Feminist, patriarchal society, heterosexual, marriage, motherhood, personal and political.

Adrienne Rich is usually considered one of the most admired and widely read poets of the twentieth century. Rich has written eloquently on social issues and problems such as sexism, racism, homophobia, imperialism, and war. She is often regarded as the poet who brought women's oppression and subjugation to the forefront of lyrical discourse. Her poetry is increasingly revered for its attractiveness both to women's experiences and to the need for a common language through which women could communicate with each other. Since the 1960s, her poetry has been influential in shaping our perspective of the feminist movement. Her poems and essays explore the intersections of poetry and politics, personal experiences, and universal implications. Unlike many other women poets, including Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, who broke down and faltered on the shoals of motherhood, Rich has survived the post-natal frustrations and problems faced by any mother with young children and creative energies. The poems of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* not only depict her psychic transitions during this period but also present the female undervoice of motherhood, silenced by a patriarchal society.

Rich's talent and competence are on full display in her early works, *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), when she imitates the lyrical structures of the male poets she studied as a child. These poems mostly exhibit conventional poetics with latent feminism that was not widely recognised at the time they were written. The poems employ imagery to convey the power that "the woman artist feels but dares not express overtly at least in America in 1951" (Keyes 28). Yet underneath the veneer of Rich's early writings lies a distinctive conflict in the recurrent motifs of inactivity, alienation, and muffled silence. Moreover, in her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences*, Rich postulates that her poems in the 1950s are "mere exercises for poems I hadn't written" (42). In the books published in the 1960s, her poetry becomes more authentic, original and immediate trying to achieve her unique voice

and to explore and define her identity by diminishing female invisibility. Rich also emphasises that she was able to “write, for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman” in the late 1950s and early 1960s (44). *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, published in 1963, stands out as a pivotal work that marked a shift in Rich’s writing style away from its more conventional foundations and towards a more explicitly feminist one. This book, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, marks the beginning of a long process of personal and poetic evolution for Rich. She as a poet has constantly changed both her approach and her subject matter. *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* established the premise of her continued advocacy for women’s rights, and this is one feature that has remained constant throughout the years. Her writing got more intimate and pressing as she realised the limitations of patriarchal conceptions of romantic relationships.

In the early 1960s, when *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* was published, there were no other prominent women poets in the American literary canon outside Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath. Rich was researching for examples of women poets who had played significant roles in establishing a canon of women’s literature. In her earlier poems, she exhibited creative energy in which the female poetic persona was gently restrained. She longs for a full expression of her female poetic consciousness and womanhood. In essence, the book depicts a woman who is torn between channelling her creative impulses and keeping constrained to her conventional responsibilities as a poet and a woman. But within this conflict lies the necessity for a female aesthetic. This struggle with the self, the conflict between being a woman and a creative artist, sexual identity and woman creativity, all pose a challenge to male dominance and the idea of women as ‘other’. Therefore, the process involved in the poems is Rich’s recognition of an overwhelming force and a conflict in the psyche that demands self-attention, self-assertion, and the exploration of female creativity. Artistic creativity as a woman is the most crucial aspect. The conflict between the women’s duties dictated by the expectations of

society and the exploration of artistic creativity comes out in her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”:

Now, to be maternal with small children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage, requires a holding-back, a putting-aside of that imaginative activity, and seems to demand instead a kind of conservatism. I want to make it clear that I am not saying that in order to write well or think well, it is necessary to become unavailable to others, or to become a devouring ego. This has been the myth of the masculine artist and thinker; and I repeat, I do not accept it. But to be a female human being trying to fulfil traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination. The word traditional is important here. There must be ways, and we will be finding out more and more about them, in which the energy of creation and the energy of relation can be united. (42)

As Betsy Erkkila argues in her third volume, Rich attempts to unite “the divided energies of body and mind, woman and poet, relation and creation” (157). Her needs to express and explore her creative self within the constrictions of the domestic world lead her, as Claire Keyes opines in her essay “The Angels Chiding”: *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* opines “to discover ways to unite “the energy of creation and the energy of relation”. Such a discovery would constitute a basic element in a female tradition” (Keyes 32).

Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* was published in 1973, after a hiatus of eight years during which Rich was preoccupied with the responsibilities of being a wife and mother of three young boys. In 1959, Rich experienced her third and final birth of a child. Having three children in four years, she experienced feelings of discontent and dejection with the traditional roles of woman and wife. While the birth of the child was welcome, Rich’s journal entries published in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and*

Institution reveal her burgeoning discontentment with marriage and motherhood as she yearns for the time to “again be free, no longer so physically tired, pursuing a more or less intellectual and creative life” (28). As a result, her urge to write was at odds with her responsibilities as a mother and wife. Struggling to find time to write, Rich wrote in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*: “I experienced my depressions, bursts of anger, a sense of entrapment” (27). In a 1958 journal entry, Rich pushes against feelings of stagnation, recognizing that it is “really death that I have been fearing- the crumbling to death of that scarcely-born physiognomy which my whole life has been a battle to give birth to-a recognizable, autonomous self, a creation in poetry and in life” (29). This creation of an autonomous self began to emerge in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*.

“The experience of motherhood,” Rich wrote “was eventually to radicalize me” (123). Rich was torn between her poetic persona and poetic self on the one hand and the traditional roles as a woman and the male approval on the other during the eight-year silence. But in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* the female creative energies and the poetic persona are very much awake and closer to the surface, which makes the poems angrier and a severe indictment of patriarchal society. The battle in her psyche and the urge to express her poetic self free from any conflicts and restraints of feminine identity make her poems more powerful. This expression of her creative self will help her to develop a female aesthetic and a feminist writing tradition that will shape a strong women’s tradition in American culture. *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* is actually the starting point of Rich’s overt expression of her feminist vision which will take another decade to surface in more powerful and strategic ways. The volume demonstrates the first sign of her reconciliation of what she is—a poet and who she is—a woman. Moreover, this reconciliation will help her to become “a woman who is giving birth to myself” (184). Thus, it was in this volume of poems that Adrienne Rich first hinted at the radical transformation she would undergo from housewife to outspoken lesbian feminist.

Rich, in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, opts to concentrate on the woman who isn't tormented by her roles as a wife, mother, or daughter, and instead brings to light the aspects of herself that were hidden by her more conventional style of writing. The lines of the poems are also more innovative and experimental. She writes in her essay "Poetry and Experience" that writing *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* helped her realise that poetry is more about personal experiences than about universal significance and that this realisation influenced her writing process, "perhaps a simple way of putting it would be to say that instead of poems about experiences, I am getting poems that are experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it" (Rich,165). In 1963, when she was getting closer to the end of her third collection, Rich found herself flitting across the numerous events that comprised her life at the time. Rich's attempts to combine her work and personal life gave rise to the new poetry, which looks at the tensions between women's traditional roles in society and the creative energy of an artist.

"Over two years, I wrote a ten-part poem called "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," in a longer, looser mode than I'd ever trusted myself with before. It was an extraordinary relief to write that poem" (43), claims Adrienne Rich in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision". She further adds that in the poem she utilises the experiences of her life as she wrestles with her creative self within the strict boundaries of domestic life:

The poem was jotted in fragments during children's naps, brief hours in a library, or at 3 a.m. after rising with a wakeful child. I despaired of doing any continuous work at this time. Yet I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be "universal," which meant, of course, non-female. Until then I had tried very much not to identify myself as a female poet. (43)

So, the title poem of the collection gives more information about her search for an independent sense of self. This poem is a representation of the numerous women who are trapped under the rigid gender norms that have been created by men and maintained by women. Rich gave each woman a unique cultural setting by using carefully chosen quotes that shed light on societal and historical norms about women's roles. The poem revolves around a conflict between two spheres of thought: the feminine ideals sanctioned and accepted by society, and the creative or rebellious woman who attempts to transcend beyond these ideals. The poem is structured around the central topic of a woman's connection to her own creative potential: how she wants it yet fears it, how using the power means going against all patriarchal traditions. At last, all these strands move towards a definition of the power of women not merely the strength of women but the ability of women to transform and create.

The first section of the poem establishes the conflict that will develop between the elder lady, who was "once a belle in Shreveport" (1) and her daughter-in-law, who scrubs teaspoons and matures in a different direction. The second part of the poem focuses on how she develops over time. The first line of the poem describes a housewife or the mother-in-law, who originally hailed from Shreveport and had been a stunning and remarkable young woman. She enjoys returning to the styles and interests of her youth, such as an interest in performing the classical composer Chopin. The songs she plays reflect her fondness for remembering her youth and the easier days she lived through. She is now a mentally unstable housewife preoccupied with several problems. :

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 (7-11)

The daughter-in-law rejects her for not just making her life difficult, but also for not having any ambitions that she could pursue herself. The poem opens with the speaker's mother-in-law being revealed as a constraining factor in her daily existence. The opening four stanzas of the poem provide a succession of glimpses of the tense dynamic between the two ladies. The speaker condemns the elderly lady and accuses her of ignoring her own needs in favour of maintaining an outwardly perfect appearance. The younger lady condemns the elder one for being out of touch with contemporary feminist ideals. The sentiments expressed in the poem towards the lady who is complicit in the act of denying her own existence are conflicted and range from pity to indignation. The younger woman's disenchantment with family life is shown in a series of vignettes. The young lady understands that she, too, is losing her individuality. The angels or her own conscience urge her to take action against this ongoing injustice repeatedly. But the angels tell her that she has been so physically, emotionally, and spiritually beaten down that "nothing hurts her anymore" (24) and that her plight forces her to conclude that she must "*save yourself; others you cannot save*" (19). There is no sense of community or solace, and the restriction imposed on women by cultural constraints causes the conflicts expressed in Dickinson's writings and Rich's personal experiences.

The retrieval and expansion of elements of women's lives from both past and present women, unknown and well-known, is a key topic that runs throughout Rich's poetry. Rich's poetry stresses the network of female connections, as well as the connections between past and contemporary writers. The poems in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* also depict women trapped within an oppressive cultural sphere that denies them complete individuality and autonomous identity. The fourth section of the poem portrays the activities of a housewife who is also a poet. As the housewife sits "reading while waiting / for the iron to heat" (43-44), she thinks about Emily Dickinson's writing, "My life had stood -a loaded gun" (45). The housewife rarely finds time for herself. When there is a never-ending list of activities that must be

completed each day, reading and writing become prohibited indulgences. Reading was artistically contrasted with waiting, and writing was artistically contrasted with the pantry. This opposition highlights the clash between creative vitality and destructive confinement, which Dickinson's phrases sum up well. Finding time for creative work within the confines of household responsibilities is a source of stress and aggravation, and this portion of the poem establishes a connection between the speaker of the poem and Dickinson's actual experience in that regard.

The poem does more than just provide vivid mental images of women's existence; it also raises concerns about women's culpability in their roles as victims, objects of beauty, and dependents. The speaker in Rich's poem criticises the women for not doing more to challenge their oppressive roles. In the third section, two intelligent women are seen debating with one another, with the speaker saying: "The argument *ad feminam*, all the old knives / that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours" (37- 38). Thus, women who are victimised by masculine stereotypes often get furious, either at themselves or at other women. The poet also depicts contemporary forms of imprisonment and constraint as she points out: "*Dulce ridens, dulce loquens, / she shaves her legs until they gleam /like petrified mammoth-tusk*" (50-52). The woman is attempting to live up to the patriarchal ideals of a woman who shaves her legs while smiling sweetly and speaking gently. In her article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich argues that women have been forced to engage in pointless forms of beauty maintenance as part of a devious scheme to limit their freedom of movement. In other words, she claims that she is losing her identity in an effort to fit into what she sees as masculine preconceptions of women.

The poem is also noteworthy for its recognition of the punishments, the male disapproval and vilification, and the obstacles faced by women in our male-dominated society for transgressing the traditional gender roles of a woman. Whenever women in our society try

to go beyond these ideas of femininity created by patriarchal culture and want to assert their autonomous identity and individuality, the heterosexual society and particularly men, try to punish, degrade, or subjugate them. Sections seven to nine of the poem describe various images of the subjugation and subordination of women. The poet also depicts the sexism and misogyny directed at a unique woman whose brilliance and aspirations are seen as frightening by males. Ambitious and talented women such as Mary Wollstonecraft and the woman preacher mentioned in the ninth section are dismissed or deprecated by patriarchal authorities. Mary Wollstonecraft was labelled “harpy shrew and whore” (76) by male supremacist culture. In the eighth section, Rich’s reference to Diderot, a French philosopher who said “You all die at fifteen” (77), speaks of how women do in fact die at fifteen in a certain sense as their dreams, aspirations, desires, and sense of self are repressed by heterosexual institutions like marriage and motherhood. They can merely wish for change but are unable to make it. The contrast between the dream of lost opportunities and the hard realities is also noteworthy in the following lines:

...all that we might have been,
 all that we were—fire, tears,
 wit, taste, martyred ambition—
 stirs like the memory of refused adultery
 the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years. (81-85)

According to Rich, women did not seem to anticipate much more than recognition of their abilities, and they did not appear to appreciate their abilities to effect change. The last two sections become Rich’s severe indictment of female passivity. Section nine plays upon a statement by Samuel Johnson regarding women preachers, “*Not that it is done well, but / that it is done at all?*” (86-87), and questions whether women have also played a role in maintaining their own positions of passivity. Rich’s poem implicates women’s complicity in their own

oppression. The speaker in sections nine and ten accuses women of refusing to take responsibility for their lives because they prefer passivity and a passive lifestyle. The women in our society “bemused by gallantry” (98) remain trapped inside the confines of society’s established norms. Moreover, the poem implies that women often support the same things that imprison them:

Time is male
and in his cups drinks to the fair.
Bemused by gallantry, we hear.
our mediocrities over-praised,
indolence read as abnegation. (96-100)

But those who refuse to conform, whose crime is to subvert the patriarchal notions of femininity, are rewarded with “solitary confinement, / tear gas, attrition shelling” (105-106).

Most significantly, the poem’s presentation of the women’s varied circumstances assists in illustrating the dominance of patriarchy. “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” exposes the patriarchal influences that oppress women, but also suggests women’s potential to overcome those oppressive forces. The poem’s last section depicts this survival as the speaker envisions a woman, “long about her coming, who must be / more merciless to herself than history” (109-110). Interestingly, the speaker employs the personal pronoun for the first time and the poem concludes on a positive note when it incorporates the word ‘ours’ - a reminder to women that they too have their own histories and communities that they must proclaim by rejecting the constrictions of hetero-patriarchal norms. The insertion of ‘I’ in the final stanza suggests Rich’s integration of her life into work. Last but not the least, the comments on women’s history point to Rich’s willingness to establish herself as a spokesperson for women’s rights and issues. Thus, she concludes her poem with a vision of a woman emerging from the darkness of the past.

The poems like “At Majority”, “From Morning-Glory to Petersburg”, “The Loser”, “Merely to Know”, “A Woman Mourned by Daughters”, also express the anger, the waste, the pain, and the frustration of women and women’s creative power who are culturally and socially subordinated, subjugated, and tortured. As suggested by the volume’s title, there is a feeling of being forever captured in a role. A network of images of brides, women in labour, wives, and midwives, and photographic instruments are introduced and repeated in these poems to reinforce the sense of women’s physical and spiritual entrapment in different gender roles like mother, wife, daughter, and sister. The book argues that the oppressed are just as responsible for perpetuating their situation as the oppressor. The poems shed light on the torment that is inflicted upon women at the hands of matrimony. The imagery depicted in the poems gives the impression that a woman’s personality undergoes a dramatic transformation when she is married. In the poem, “The Loser”, Rich uses the persona of a man to deal with the frustration and conflicting emotions stemming from marriage and motherhood. The poet uses this male narrator to highlight the plight of marginalised women who are powerless to challenge or transcend stereotypical gender stereotypes. When a woman gets married, she loses her youthful vitality forever. After marriage, there is no chance for the woman to mould her life according to her choice, leading to the loss of all her individuality, energy, and freshness. Rich pictures a young wife watched by a man who “thinks of the woman he once loved” and now lost to another man. The struggles and pressures of nine years of marriage and childbearing have taken a toll on her body and beauty, but they have failed to defeat her: “You are tougher than I thought” (19). The woman, now married to another man is again fulfilling all the traditional duties of a woman. Women are caught in these male-identified roles of a woman, and the picture of the woman presented in the poem repeating the same roles twice indicates the isolated, claustrophobic existence of women in strict gender roles. The poem ends with the speaker’s positive statement about the woman’s endurance and intelligence:

I see all your intelligence
flung into that unwearied stance.
My envy is of no avail.
I turn my head and wish him well
who chafed your beauty into use
and lives forever in a house
lit by the friction of your mind. (29-35)

The poem ironically comments that the domestication of the woman is responsible for the loss of her intellectual and creative energies. From a literal level, the man seems to be the loser but on a deeper level, the real loser is the woman whose creative and intellectual fires have been denied by the gender roles constructed by heterosexual society.

The poems such as “A Woman Mourned by Daughters”, “At Majority”, and “Sisters” explore the common plight and tragic situation of the women inside and out through powerful images. Personal experiences and her observations of a woman’s realistic position in a patriarchal culture have found a way in these poems. The exploitation of women in all spheres of society, and the constant tortures and pressures perpetrated on them that result in the gradual breakdown of their nerves inspire Rich to create a poetic tradition for women’s experiences. Rich’s poetic consciousness explores the victimized state of both the mother and the daughter and criticizes the responsibilities and roles that are associated with a woman. The word ‘spent’ in the third line of “A Woman Mourned by Daughters” clearly states the plight of the woman and how society and family have spent her physically, spiritually, and creatively without personal independence. The poem thus presents the universal condition of a woman who lost her vibrancy to the compromises and pressures of marriage. In the poem “At Majority”, the author expresses the belief that women must endure many trials before they may enjoy the peace of old age:

When you are old and beautiful
 And things most difficult are done
 There will be few who can recall
 Your face as it is ravaged now
 By youth and its oppressive work. (1-5)

Since the themes it explores are universal, the poem's value extends well beyond the realm of gender. The marks of age—wrinkles, spots, scars, and a generally worn appearance—are testaments to the challenges encountered throughout youth. The tranquility and contentment of old age require the sacrifice and elimination of many aspirations, goals, and desires. The poem "Sisters" paints a similar picture, depicting women's oppression as a global issue and revealing their genuine status as victims of the same patriarchal system. The poet-speaker relates a chance encounter with a beautiful woman with blue eyes in Germany. While riding together, the poet-speaker and the woman both become aware of their shared experiences as women. She shares the poet's goals, dreams, and quiet sighs of grief. The poet points out that the discontent and anxiety brought on by daily living are so strong that not even sleep can ease them.

The poems such as "Novella" and "A Marriage in the Sixties" included in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* are written on male-female relationships. These poems highlight the strict gender roles that are enforced by heterosexual society, as well as the difficulty of women breaking out of the confines of marriage. Helen Vendler, in her article "Ghostlier Demarcations, Keener Sounds", argues that these poems about marriage highlight 'the quiet isolation of minds in marriage':

In *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), we find that marriage has turned the earlier filial exile-in-space into something considerably more bitter - separation under the roof, a sense of separate-and-not-equal lives bequeathed to men and women. (Vendler 304)

Similar to her earlier works such as “An Unsaid Word” and “The Perennial Answer”, she depicts a ‘passive acceptance of isolation’ in these poems (Werner 50). The speaker in “A Marriage in the Sixties” addresses her spouse as a ‘dear fellow particle’ in an effort to find solace in their relationship. However, all attempts at connection ultimately lead to isolation, despite their best intentions:

Two strangers, thrust for life upon a rock,
may have at last the perfect hour of talk
that language aches for; still—
two minds, two messages. (32-35)

The poem “Novella” starts off with a heated discussion between the husband and the wife. The response to the debate illustrates the differences between men and women in our culture. While the husband has the option of venturing out into the world and away from the domestic sphere, the wife is confined to the responsibilities and obligations of the home. There is a possibility that the ending may hint at a reunion, yet the last words of the poem hint at the strain, tension, and difference that exists between them:

The door closes behind him.
Outside, separate as minds,
the stars too come alight. (16-18)

When you read the poem, it's clear that a woman who lives in a culture that values heterosexuality has no choice but to stay at home. They are permanently obligated to fulfil responsibilities associated with the conventional roles of wife and mother, which leads to feelings of loneliness and stress. It is very apparent that Rich is dissatisfied with these rigid gender roles that have been developed by society in order to restrict the freedom of women.

Thus, with the publication of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, Rich emerges as a more confident and women-centric poet. The volume, as opined by Jeannette E. Riley in

Understanding Adrienne Rich, portrays “Rich’s refusal to allow the feelings of depression, felt so often during the years she created her first two volumes and during the eight years of silence she endured as she tended to her roles as mother and wife, to defeat her life and her art” (23). She gains the confidence to take charge of her life somewhere between her first two collections and *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*. The volume thus hints that Rich is no longer content to live a life of silence and that she has committed herself to ‘speaking out’. Therefore, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* represents a kind of personal discovery of an autonomous identity and a distinct artistic, creative self, which will bring her closer to what will become the primary source of her poetry - the blending of personal and political.

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