

## A Symbolic Reading of Adrienne Rich's *An Unsaid Word*

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**ABSTRACT** An imitation of the literary styles and modes of expression of the great writers in the post-World War II was the criterion of success for any male or female writer. The conventions of T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden influenced the poetics and thought of the younger generation poets. For example, Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) was an ardent disciple of these conventions in her early career. She was influenced by the phallogocentric discourse of subject formation. She followed this man-made discourse to be accepted within the literary circle as a successful woman writer, but she realized that this discourse didn't help women in the expression of their female voices. This study explores the failure of the phallogocentric techniques and modes of writing in the expression of Rich's female voice in *An Unsaid Word* (1951). The study is conducted in the light of Lacanian Symbolic system of identification. The study concludes that Lacanian system of identification was behind the distortions of meanings associated with women and the failure of the symbolic order in the self-expression of Rich's female character in her poem *An Unsaid Word*.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) was brought up in a milieu that was totally fashioned by patriarchal thought in every field of life. Great male figures mastered the literary scene and they created their rules for what should be written and what should not. Rich's legibility to write poetry was only found in the imitation of poetic conventions of the canon. She started writing poetry that matches the literary styles and subject matters of the period; a period that was totally fashioned by male writers' thought. Moreover, Rich was raised in a family who fed her mind with the importance of reading and imitating the great figures of literary scene. *A Change of World* (1951) was her first collection of poems that were complemented by W. H. Auden himself in his preface to this collection. Auden said:

In a young poet, as T. S. Eliot has observed, the most promising sign is craftsmanship for it is evidence of a capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible. Craftsmanship includes, of course, not only a talent for versification but also an ear and an intuitive grasp of much subtler and more difficult matters like proportion, consistency of diction and tone, and the matching of these with the subject at hand; Miss Rich's poems rarely fail on any of these counts. (Rich, 1993, 278)

It is noted above that craftsmanship, decorum and detachment were really what matter for those writers. The poetic conventions at that time entailed the writing about public issues that matter public opinions. More importantly, woman writer had nothing but to follow the rules of writing sponsored by the great masculine writers of the period. Thus, she had to talk about impersonal issues, which led to the burial of her female voice in her writings. That was the milieu that characterized the early poetry of Adrienne Rich to the extent that she was given the label of 'great imitator'.

Following these formalistic techniques and modes of expression left Rich incapable of finding the appropriate means to voice herself in her writings. She couldn't talk about her ambitions and

concerns as a woman having a life ruled by masculine thinking. Thus, she lived a duality of life between satisfying the demands of great male pioneers of the period and the following of her needs and desires as a woman seeking her own female identity. Moreover, Rich realized that the distinction of man at the expense of woman did not lie in certain innate attributes or characteristics, but it was imposed on woman by force. She wrote in her essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision* (1971) that “The charisma of Man seems to come purely from his power over her and his control of the world by force, not from anything fertile or life-giving in him” (36). Though Rich’s realizations of the oppressive doctrine of writing poems separate from the poet’s everyday life, she could not save herself and reflect her voice in her early poems because she was still using the same tools and modes of writing of the common male writers. These modes of writing convey only the fixed meanings of what Lacan called ‘the symbolic language’ that serves the masculine needs and neglects the feminine ones.

Hassan, Talif and Kaur conducted a study entitled “Resurfacing Female Identity via Language in Adrienne Rich’s *Diving into the Wreck* (2015) to explore the role of the semiotic elements in subverting the fixed meanings of the Symbolic language, which would create new meanings that help women reconstruct their female identities. The study followed Kristeva’s model of *the Semiotic and the Symbolic* to deal with the issue of reconstructing the female identity through deconstructing Freudian and Lacanian discourse of identity formation. This study focused on a later stage of Rich’s career and neglected the early stage which helped Rich be aware of the failure of the symbolic mode of signification in serving women’s needs and desires. It showed that:

Lacan’s concept of the Symbolic entails the burial of the Semiotic if the child wants to get an access into his own subjectivity. The child should give up his first identification and attachment with his mother in order to construct an identity that copes with the patriarchal model, which in turn favors the masculine over the feminine. (246)

Lacan’s symbolic system of identification was also discussed in Montashery’s “Virginia Woolf’s New Intellectualism in Relation to the Construction of a Third Gender based on Desire in her Selected Works” (2012). Montashery stated that Lacan’s symbolic order is “the realm of law, language, society, and cultural beliefs”, which is structured to go in line with the male signifier “the phallus” (26). Thus, women fail to reflect their desires, which are key determinants in the identity formation. Their study was concerned with the third space created between the semiotic and the symbolic.

## 2. LACAN’S THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

The publication of Lacan’s *Ecrits* (1966) brought him fame and introduced a new turn to the field of psychoanalysis. Lacan re-formulated the theory of the human subject through presenting his model of the human psyche. Lacan thinks that culture, language and unconscious desires produce subjectivity (McAfee, 2004, 30). Exploiting Levi-Strauss’ structural anthropology, De Saussure’s linguistics and Freud’s psychoanalysis, he created a model for the psychic development of the human subject that consists of three stages: the imaginary, the real and the symbolic. The imaginary stage is used to describe the pre-Oedipal identification of the infant with its mirror image. The imaginary order is the realm of the mother, wishes, fantasies and images, and in this phase the infant is genderless; neither feminine nor masculine (Joodaki, 2015, 166). The mirror stage is when the infant sees itself in the mirror. Here, the infant identifies itself with an outside image. Lacan said that the infant passes through a stage in which an external image of the body, reflected in a mirror, produces a psychic response that gives rise to the mental representation of an “I”. The infant sees that it is different from others, which leads to the shaping of its ego. Jameson said in his *Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject* (1977):

the Imaginary - a kind of pre-verbal register whose logic is essentially visual-precedes it as a stage in the development of the psyche. Its moment of formation-and that existential situation in which its specificity is most strikingly dramatized-has been named the "mirror stage" by Lacan, who thereby designates that moment between six and eighteen months in which the child first demonstrably "recognizes" his or her own image in the mirror, ... (353)

The symbolic order was constituted by the child's introduction to the public world of cultural meaning that was associated by Lacan with the father's speech. Lacan said that when the child accesses into the symbolic world, he experiences a deep 'divide' that occurs in the unconscious self. Such division causes the separation between language and emotions. This time language plays very important role in the construction of identity.

The symbolic order and its rules create certain biased structures for the human subject. The split is experienced by the child when it enters the symbolic order after the resolution of Freud's *Oedipus and Castration complex*. The infant feels anxious seeing itself in the mirror, so it starts projecting its aggression on to another in the real world. Signification for Lacan is not a process of infinite free play. For Lacan, meanings of the symbolic order are fixed and associated with a primary signifier, "the Phallus". Unlike Freud who associated the structure of identity with the possession and lack of sexual organ, Lacan was interested in what the sexual organ signified. The phallus, the signifier of the sexual difference, guarantees the patriarchal structure of the symbolic order. The realization of female child that she lacks something was the main reason behind the problematic relationship of women with the Symbolic order. Lacan's the symbolic order creates barriers between men and women. It puts them in sharp contrast to each other leaving them in a situation of binary opposition because of the phallus. Man was centred because he had the phallus while woman was set in the margin because she lacked it. Thus, the signifying system of the symbolic order left woman in a weak position, dictating upon her what was fit and unfit to write about. Simultaneously, woman was left with no choices but to follow the discourses of the symbolic order which was the major reason behind woman's failure in expressing themselves in their writings.

### 3. THE SYMBOLIC READING OF RICH'S AN UNSAID WORD

*An Unsaid Word* was a poem collected in Rich's *A Change of World* and marked her commitment to the formalistic style of the great writers of the period. The poem was written in a stage where Rich was living a false unconscious life thinking that success lies in the imitation of the great male figures of the literary scene. Thus, she crafted her poems and manipulated her subject-matters to go in accordance with the discourses of the patriarchal world. *An Unsaid Word* discussed the relationship between man and woman. This poem was written in a milieu fashioned by Eliot's conventions and discourse of the kind of writing that was needed. Detachment of the self was one of these major conventions. Thus, Rich kept herself detached of what was going on in her poems as in the *An Unsaid Word* in order to meet the criteria of success. She was looking for a place even though that place would not match her because already she did not have one. At that period, woman writer had to succumb to the masculine rules of Lacan's symbolic order in relation to the phallus. Thus, she had to bury her voice and emotions in order to be admitted a place in that world. Rich in her early poetry 'spoke in a derivative voice, the language of the "universal." Reluctant to speak as a woman, she echoed the one of her male poetic ancestors. Because she hesitated to voice her own experience, her early poems are highly polished but avoid emotional depth.' (Reisman, 2012, p, 200)

Keyes says that W. H. Auden's praise for Rich in his forward to *A Change of World* came as a result of her going in line with the typical experiences and artistic modes of expression of the patriarchal discourses. She was measured according to the standards of men, neglecting her being a

woman. Her personal voice was absent in her early poetry because she was introduced to the public by Auden as ‘a good imitator’. (Keyes, 1986, p.16)

The symbolic Language is the means of circulating man’s power because language provides the symbol and connections by which the world is interpreted. The poststructuralists think that the “process of symbolic activity does more than construct the ideal mode of domination. It actively plays a part in the construction of thought as it attempts to structure experience” (Kirsch, 2000, 42).

The female speaker in *An Unsaid Word* was living in man’s world which was symbolic and masculine. The speaker was not given a name in the poem because already women had no names besides the great names of masculine writers. The female name was associated with negativity as a signifier, that’s why female writers used male nicknames because they looked for power and acceptance. Hereby, Rich did not identify herself with the speaker of her poem. The persona was entrapped in her house because patriarchy defined woman’s role in the society as ‘the Angel of the House’. The woman waited in her position and didn’t take a step forward to join her man in his journey. She was shouting to him but the man was not caring to the shouts of this woman.

Actually, all the critical views and receptions written about this poem went in line with the patriarchal ideology and masculine discourse of inferiorizing woman’s status in the society by decentralizing her position and marginalizing her. Women writers at the time of Adrienne Rich had to accept the ways of writing that coincide with the patriarchal values. Women writer talked about public issues in their particular contexts. She couldn’t join her man in his thought because woman was associated with nature in order to signify her incapacity for logical thinking. Thus, the man in the poem left her behind thinking alone in his ‘estranged’ world:

She who has power to call her man  
From that estranged intensity  
Where his mind forages alone, <sup>1</sup> (1-3)

The woman was severely criticized of being submissive because she stayed there waiting for her man without having the gut to join him. This understanding was intensified by the fact that she was there waiting for him accepting the label given to her that she was “still his own”. In addition, the last line of the poem stereotypes this woman because this was the norm that woman keeps waiting and weeping for the absence of the master of the house. Feminists criticized that woman in Rich’s poem as passive and submissive because she was conscious of her bitter reality resulted from following man-made discourse, though she made no reaction. This realization was not enough to change her course of life with that selfish man because she thought mistakenly that going with this discourse was the only means of defining herself. Her problem was her belief in the male discourse as the appropriate one of leading a life. Scott states in his “Domination and the Arts of Resistance” (1990) that “THE POWERFUL, ..., have a vital interest in keeping up the appearances appropriate to their form of domination. Subordinates, for their part, ordinarily have good reasons to help sustain those appearances or, at least, not openly to contradict them.” (70).

Rich said in her masterpiece, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986) that women’s role in the society is to be mothers, care-takers, and nurturers:

Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal “instinct” rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self. Motherhood is “sacred” so long as its offspring are “legitimate”—that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother.  
(42)

The woman in this poem was described as confused and lost because her man left her. She was given this description to signify that this woman couldn’t live without the aid of man. The power she enjoyed to call her man was misunderstood as a power resulting from the fear of being alone. She was long time ago described by patriarchy as being incapable of living alone, unless in relation to the existence of a man. She could not make use of her words because they signify only man’s

needs and desires. She lacked the appropriate means to empower herself. Thus, woman of the poem 'stands where he left her' with no choice to join him or to stay alone.

Yet keeps her pace and leaves him free,  
And when his thoughts to her return  
Stands where he left her, still his own,  
Knows this the hardest thing to learn. (4-7)

The speaker in Rich's *An Unsaid Word* restrained herself by turning the waiting of her man a virtuous act. She mastered the act of self-denial to be able to communicate with the old-fashioned thought of male of the fifties. She repressed her most elemental feelings. She did not possess her own being; she depended upon man to validate her partial existence. She thought of herself as a burden to man. When she left him go, she used the words 'leaves him free,' kept waiting till 'his thoughts return to her,' to find her stand still in the same place. (Keith, 2012, p. 105)

Although, this woman did not show her weakness in the poem, she kept waiting because she accepted the role prescribed to her by the patriarchal discourses. She didn't take care of herself, but only caring for the man. She didn't even ask him to join him in his journey, instead she left him go alone, 'Yet keeps her pace and leaves him free'. She described herself as having the power, but this kind of power was misused and negative. Her power was restricted to the call of her man instead of directing the power to her own self by knowing, caring, and expressing that self.

The symbolic reading of *An Unsaid Word* showed that there are two voices within this poem; the dominant and the dominated. Of course, the dominant male voice prevailed because woman accepted her subservient role given to her by patriarchy. She experienced her powers negatively, muting her words and desires to satisfy her male fantasies. The formal style of writing the poem gives the priority to the dominant male voice. The poem was highly polished with carefully cadenced stanzas, rhymes and rhythms that fitted into a symmetry which was demanded by the masculine writers to approve the publication of any literary work. The rhyme was disciplined following the scheme of (a, b, a, b, a, a, a) which indicates the lack of choices for the persona. The poem's syntax is perfect and appears effortless and graceful. The poem meets the requirements of writing a well-crafted poem, in which no colloquial expressions are used and no personal feelings are mentioned. Every thought mentioned is related in a way or another to the dominant male character in the poem. The language controls the persona in this poem, leaving her with no choice to select her material resources in talking about herself. (Keyes, 1986, 20)

The man-made symbolic order restrained woman's role in the society leaving her with few choices top listed with being unfit to logical reasoning. The persona in the poem could not rely on the semiotic elements associated with maternity because woman was forbidden to talk about her personal life. Rich remained within the patriarchal context of what is fit and unfit for women to write about. Thus, the persona accepted the labels given to her as being illogical. She used the word 'forage', which carries symbolic interpretation that signifies man's eligibility to thinking aside from woman's incompetence for reason. He left her behind going alone to feed his mind in a world that was so unfamiliar to her, 'where his mind forages alone'. This symbolic signification was intensified by the adjective "estranged" used to describe the world man went to in order to feed his mind alone because he thought that his woman was no fit but to domestic roles. The first collection of *A Change of World* proved Rich's failure in finding the female voice inside her because she was looking "for the same things she had found in the poetry of men, because she wanted women poets to be equals of men, and to be equal was still confused with sounding the same" (Martin, 1984, p. 94).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the persona of Rich's *An Unsaid Word* could not express her words and feelings and kept them unsaid because she followed the fixed meanings raised by the symbolic order signifiers posited by Lacan. At first, Rich felt it was the best way to get her persona voiced

but unfortunately it was false and biased. Pursuing an acceptance and admittance by the great male thinkers of the period, Rich was ready to sacrifice every personal thing to meet their demands; she “had suppressed, omitted, falsified even, certain disturbing elements, to gain that perfection of order” (ARPP, 165). That pursuit was the major reason behind Rich’s early false unconscious understanding of the position of woman in life and her impotence of transforming herself and crossing the bars created by the patriarchal discourse. The study re-introduces the female persona in *An Unsaid Word* as a woman who could not utilize the symbolic reference of signifiers because of their bias. Instead of presenting her as a passive stereotypic woman only, the female persona is introduced as a woman lacking the language’s appropriate signifiers that could empower woman in the face of dominant patriarchal ideology.

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