



# Adrienne Rich's Poetry: An Ecofeminist Perspective

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## Abstract

The present paper seeks to study the connections the woman question makes with the questions of ecology and environment in the poetry of Adrienne rich. The methodology of the paper is first to establish an understanding of the basic concepts involved in ecological feminism and then to study their literacy manifestations in Adrienne Rich's poetry. The present capitalist model of development, which is both exploitative and depletory, foregrounds a need to engage with such discourses.

## Keywords

Ecofeminism, Ecology, Western Rationalist Framework, Sustainable Development, Patriarchy, Radical Feminism, Technology.

## Introduction

Prior to the European scientific revolution, nature was conceptualized as a living, nurturing organism. Such a view served to contain the abuse of nature. Earth was considered alive and sentient and to carry out acts of destruction against it was seen as a breach of ethical behavior. With the development of modern science and technology, nature increasingly came to be viewed as a passive physical back drop which needed to be acted upon. Nature became the object and the western rationalist framework, the active subject.

However, the identification of the female with nature has survived. Within the western patriarchal ideology, it is also responsible for creating a dualist account of Man as essentially rational and therefore separate from the rest of nature. Consequently, a privileging of reason over emotion has been used to dominate and subjugate women and nature. To tame their wildness and put nature in the service of the rational, industrial, and progressive human enterprise. The present western developmental model, which is predicated on ruthless plunder of earth's resources, invariably produces poverty in certain sections of society, especially women who depend on earth's bounty for their sustenance.

Ecofeminism attempts a strategy for sustainable development, combining environmentalism with feminism. Inherent in such a primal identification of women with nature is the danger of returning to the very regressive and limiting social definitions from which feminists have struggled to emancipate women. However, these limitations need to be approached with a more complex and strategic understanding of this equation as offering an opportunity of social praxis for women's emancipation through ecological activism.

### **Aims and Objectives**

- To study the works of Adrienne Rich in the light of discourses of Ecofeminism.
- To ground Adrienne Rich's Ecofeminist approach as an empowering for women.

### **The Study Area and Methodology**

The paper seeks to study Adrienne Rich's poetry in the context of Ecofeminist discourses. A textual study of poems and essays of Adrienne Rich has been undertaken. Alongside theoretical grounding of Ecofeminist discourses has been kept in center space attempting to understand the deep connections between the exploitative western technological developmental model and the subsequent exacerbation in the subjugation and exploitation of women. The study limits itself to select poems and writings by Adrienne Rich. It also attempts to read them primarily in the light of Ecofeminist discourses which attempt to recover power for women by embedding it in their innate connection to nature/ nurture.

The term "Ecofeminism" was introduced in the mid-1970's by French feminist writer Françoise d' Eaubonne. Ecofeminism assumes that there are critical connections between the domination of nature and the domination of women. Interconnections are drawn between feminist and ecological concerns. The present model of capitalistic development is one that maintains itself through the colonization of women; of foreign people and their lands; and of nature. Ecofeminists and environmentalists are allies in a greater fight to end this logic of domination. The Ecofeminist perspective according to Vandana Shiva is that "life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation and mutual care and love" (Shiva Mies 6). The Ecofeminist approach glorifies the feminine as a principle rather than as a gender role. As Shiva points out "the violence to nature as symptomized by the current ecological crisis and violence to women as symptomized by women's subjugation and exploitation, arise from subjugation of the feminine principle" (Shiva Mies 193)

The identity and destiny of women and nature are seen by ecofeminists as merged. According to them women are ontologically and epistemologically 'closer' to nature therefore their voices ought to be privileged in ethical discussions of interspecies relations. The masculine and the feminine principles are structurally dichotomized and hierarchically opposed to each other within the capitalist patriarchy. One is always considered superior, always thriving and progressing at the expense of the other. Commenting on this inevitable dichotomy within the given system Adrienne rich states: "It is easy to say we cannot even know what is truly male or truly female. This much we can know, we do know that these principles have been, split apart and set in antagonism within each of us by a male dominated intellectual and political heritage" (Rich *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* 78).

However, there are inherent pitfalls in using a paradigm where the identification of the female with nature survives. Within the Western patriarchal ideology, a privileging of reason over emotion has been used to dominate women and nature. It is also responsible for creating a dualist account of 'man' as essentially rational

and therefore separate from the rest of nature. This ideology has worked to subdue nature/ woman, to tame her wildness and to put nature in the service of 'human' enterprise. The present model of development project is based on ruthless plundering of the earth's resources, creating poverty in certain sections of society, especially women, who depend upon the earth's resources for their sustenance.

Ecofeminism attempts a strategy for sustainable development, combining environmentalism with feminism. The identification of women with nature can mean a return to the regressive social definitions from which feminists have sought to emancipate women. However, this is also social praxis and strategizing as it becomes the source of women's empowerment and ecological activism. Establishing clearly her allegiance with the Ecofeminist ideologies Adrienne Rich states in *Of woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and institution*, "feminist history is not history about women only; it looks afresh at what men have done and how they have behaved, not only toward women but toward each other and the natural world" (146). In the early seventies Rich identified herself as a radical feminist and a lesbian separatist. She viewed the patriarchal structure of society as the root cause of the exploitation of women, as well as that of nature and she subsequently envisions a beneficent female power in consonance with nature and its rhythms. She writes in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*,

Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The Feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life we require not only control of our bodies (though control is a prerequisite); we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence. (21)

In her opinion, women's vital connection with nature gives the female sex a distinct advantage in healing the mind-body split, the curse of modern, technological existence. Her vision recalls feminists like Susan Griffin and Mary Dally who argue that the women-nature connection has been denigrated and defiled by patriarchal culture. The bond of woman with nature in fact represents a significant and empowering bridge for women – a bridge to their past and a bridge to the natural cycles that seem to have such significance in women's lives. This connection is often cited as a 'natural' reason for the subordination of women in the patriarchal models of economic development. But it can also be seen as a reason for the empowerment of women in terms of natural resources. Rich acknowledges the female principle to be the locus of transforming power and designates women's body as a metaphor of the life force itself with the passion to make and remake again where such unmaking reigns.

Ecology and economy both are rooted in the same Greek word "Oikos", meaning household. A rudimentary form of ecology based economy is still practiced by a major share of female population in the world. The male patriarchal head is often a perpetrator of exploitation apparatuses within the family, directing the feelings and fortunes of women folk. Women are pushed to the margins under the homogenizing "specialist" approach adopted by the scientific project. People without "specific knowledge" are treated as ignorant, no matter what their indigenous skills might be. Adrienne Rich captures this ideology as the basis of sexist oppression and the

annihilation of the minority discourse of the native Indians in America in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far Poems*:

You have been taught that light  
 Came  
 To the Dark Continent  
 With white power  
 That the Indians  
 Live in filth  
 And occult animal rites (34)

Ecofeminists offer a vision of an alternate society, based not on the model of growth-oriented industrialism and consumerism, but close to what is called the subsistence perspective. The efforts of the Ecofeminist's have been to create a holistic, all life embracing cosmology and anthropology. Vandana Shiva stresses the assertion of 'feminine principle' as a survival strategy.

In the dialogic around the conflict between development and ecological concerns, the parameters often define development as relating to a material and objective basis of life and ecology as being concerned with non-material and subjective factors such as scenic beauty. But such arguments disguise the real dichotomy between ecologically sound development and unsustainable and ecologically destructive growth. This results in a misrepresentation of ecofeminism as nostalgia for the past and a redundant, outdated mode of thinking. However, Ecofeminism marks a significant intervention in strategizing for sustainable developmental models.

A major aspect of ecofeminism as a process of political resistance is the "resurrection of the subjugated vernacular knowledge of the local people." Privileging the local and indigenous knowledge ecofeminism endeavors to overcome the violation and expropriation of native culture by the white entrepreneurs. The myth perpetrated by the dominant white ideology, claims for white males a higher privileged status of covenanters who brought civilization and enlightenment to the savage cultures. Rich identifies these myths as apparatuses for an exploitative consumerism and the destruction of the natural resources. The men of science and rationality who claim to educate the savage child are exposed as "devourers of the forest/ leaving teeth of metal in every tree/ so the tree can neither grow/ nor be cut for lumber." (Rich *Collected Poems 1950-2012* 405) Their "special" knowledge is of no use to the savage child as they "teach you names for things/ you did not need" (401) and is seen as a bid to propagate their consumerist culture. The hold of a commercial civilization on a sensitive personality is primarily exploitative. Rich therefore closes her poem on the rhetorical question as to "why should the wild child/ weep for the scientists/ why." (406) Rich privileges the local and indigenous knowledge in the poem titled after Mary Jane Colter, whose architecture drew on native American art and was an effort to overcome the violation and expropriation of native culture by white entrepreneurs. She says in her poem 'Mary Jane Colter, 1905,' "I want this glory,/ I want to place my own conception/ and that of the Indians whose land this was/ at the edge of this incommensurable thing." (567)

The Western industrial model of expansion and development maintains a structural dichotomy between men on the one hand and women, children natives and nature on the other. Nature is seen as potential raw material to be

converted into cash. Adrienne Rich opposes this linear and limiting dichotomy of the aligned men and the non-aligned 'others'. She posits a life affirming hope in her hope that the movement she was building would further the conscious work of turning the otherness into a keen lens of empathy.

Traditionally the mainstream sciences are customarily portrayed as universal truths. For feminists however, the production of knowledge is best described as a social activity embedded in a certain culture and world view and universalization becomes a falsifying perspective which ignores differences of class caste race amongst women. The Ecofeminists attempt a new epistemology for cognition and the questions of the 'knower', the 'known', and the processes determining the legitimate 'knowing' are given a feminist lens. Talking of this shift Rich writes in her essay "What does a woman need to know",

The effects of this kind of power are all around us, even literally in the water we drink and the air we breathe, in the form of carcinogens and radioactive wastes, but for a long time now feminists have been talking about redefining power, about the meaning of power which returns to the root-*posse, poertre, pouvoir*: to be able to have the potential, to possess and use one's energy of creation-transforming powers. (*A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* 34)

With the charge of being essentialist, Ecofeminism is in the last resort a personal response to a planetary crisis.

Are we all in training for something we don't name?  
 To exact reparation for things  
 Done long ago to us and to those who did not  
 Survive what was done to them whom we ought to honour  
 With grief with fury with action  
 On a pure night on a night when pollution  
 Seems absurdity when the undamaged planet seems to turn  
 Like a bowl of crystal in black ether  
 They are the pieces of us that lies out there  
 Knowing knowing knowing (45)

The poetry of Adrienne Rich pans these relevant concerns which become more and more centre stage in today's ferment of planetary crisis. The myopia of the scientific spectacle needs to be rectified by an environmental activism which will make visible the "rainbow" as the covenant of the lord; both precious and precarious at the same time.

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