

## Adrienne Rich as a Cultural Critic

Dr. Hina Gupta

Assistant Professor

Post Graduate Department of English  
Patel Memorial College Rajpura (Punjab)

---

### Abstract

Rich's poetry faithfully expresses the doings and misdoings in contemporary history, in order to critique the contemporaneous to bring greater sanity in the world. She like a cultural critic envisions for a "better world . . . a world in which all people have the material conditions of survival, the political conditions of freedom and justice, and the intellectual conditions of education and expression" (Grossberg, *Cultural Studies* passim 6,100).

Key Words: Emancipation, curative power of poetry, "better world," hegemony, anti-U.S. imperialism

---

### Research Paper

Adrienne Rich's poetry is of a concerned intellectual who is an observer pained by the inhuman, and for her U.S. imperialism came to epitomize much of the oppression and coercion prevalent in the world that the poet sought to appraise both on the national and international levels. Emancipatory potential as a central concern is the key characteristic of Rich's poetry. She wants to usher in greater awareness of this in the world through her poetry and prose. Rich seems to echo Marx's letter to Ruge, where he stressed upon the importance of bringing an awareness to the people. He wrote:

We do not say to the world: cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something it has to acquire, even if it does not want to (Marx, *Karl Marx* 144).

Rich's poetry faithfully expresses the doings and misdoings in contemporary history, in order to critique the contemporaneous to bring greater sanity in the world. Indeed, fidelity of expression is the laudable characteristic of Rich's poetry. Marx also critiqued history and even the highest forms of established knowledge, in order to seek emancipation for humanity. He reflected upon this in an important remark in *Capital*. He said:

(r)eflection on the forms of social life, hence also scientific analysis of these forms, takes a course directly opposite to their actual development. Reflection begins *post festum* [after the event], and therefore with the results of the process of development ready to hand. . . . [These forms] already possess the fixed quality of natural forms of social life before man seeks to give an account, not of their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, both of their content and meaning (Marx, *Capital* 166).

It falls to the lot of the intellectuals like Rich, who fulfil their responsibilities in the public sphere by critiquing the established forms in the civil society. Indeed, Rich has been doing all this consistently through her poetry and prose. She herself paid a compliment to Marx and his work in the “Foreword” to her *Arts of the Possible*. She said:

What kept me going was the sense of being in the company of a great geographer of the human condition [i.e. Marx]; and, specifically, a sense of *recognition*: how profit-driven economic relations filter into zones of thought and feeling. Marx’s depiction of early nineteenth-century capitalism and its dehumanizing effect on the social landscape rang truer than ever at the century’s end (Rich, “Foreword,” *Arts of the Possible* iv).

It is Rich’s ambition to speak for and strive to emancipate the entire human race. She was dissatisfied by those movements, like feminism, that sought to redeem only half the human race. Rich expressed herself on these issues in the “Foreword” to *Arts of the Possible*. She said: “But, as I suggested in ‘Notes toward a Politics of Location’, my thinking was unable to fulfill itself within feminism alone” (1). Rich believed in expressing the whole truth, unvarnished, since she said she did “not believe that truth-telling exists in a bubble, sealed off from the desire for justice” (3). It is this genuine and authentic “desire” that drives Rich’s poetry and prose.

Rich in the essay *Poetry and Commitment* in 2006 contemplated upon the curative power of poetry. She said:

There’s actually an odd correlation between these ideas: poetry is either inadequate, even immoral, in the face of human suffering, or it’s unprofitable, hence useless. Either way, poets are advised to hang our heads or fold our tents. Yet in

fact, throughout the world, transfusions of poetic language can and do quite literally keep bodies and souls together—and more (Rich, *Poetry and Commitment* 26).

Cynthia L.Haven reviewed the last volume of poems, published posthumously entitled, *Later Poems: Selected and New, 1971-2012* (2013). She commented upon the above mentioned lines of Rich concerning the curative power of poetry. Cynthia said:

I agree with her argument regarding the value of poetry. But such suffering *still* has to be transformed into art, or else it’s a Twitter feed. And there’s a dangerous curve along the road: At what point is suffering used to fortify one’s sense of self, one’s sense of oneself as a compassionate person? If one is using ‘transfusions of poetic language’ for utilitarian ends, even noble ones, it’s unlikely to remain art. The muse doesn’t take to harness (Haven 206).

If we attempt to search an underlying core in Rich’s diverse and comprehensive preoccupations, perhaps it would be, in the terms of Lawrence Grossberg, an attempt at constructing, or at least envisioning a “better world . . . a world in which all people have the material conditions of survival, the political conditions of freedom and justice, and the intellectual conditions of education and expression” (Grossberg, *Cultural Studies* passim 6,100). In this sense, Rich’s work would make more sense if read in the domain of cultural studies, the academic discipline in vogue in the contemporary. Grossberg explains the concerns of the said academic discipline. He says: “Cultural Studies begins by allowing the world ‘outside’ the academy [. . .] to ask questions of us as intellectuals. Its questions, then, are derived from the researcher’s own sense of the context and the

political questions and possibilities at stake” (44). Cultural Studies pursues problems to narrate an involved and “a better story about what’s going on” (06). Grossberg says that “better stories” may not arrive at “better politics,” he is sure that the discipline is committed to exploring sundry knowledge formations and political identifications to lead to wider benefits imbued with political salience (100). Cultural Studies finds diverse forms of embedded institutional power as obnoxious. Rich also testifies to her engagement with crafting a better world. She believed that poetry is “seizing of language” to engender a: transformation of subjectivity—and the continuing life of movements for social transformation. Where language and images help us name and recognize ourselves and our condition, and practical activity for liberation renews and challenges art, there is a complementarity as necessary as the circulation of the blood. Liberatory politics is, after all, not simply opposition but an expression of the impulse to create the new, an expanding sense of what’s *humanly possible* (Rich, *Arts of the Possible* 154).

Robert Pinsky discusses American poetry and its characteristics. He says: “poetry reflects, perhaps concentrates, the American idea of individualism as it encounters the American experience of the mass—because the art of poetry by its nature operates on a level as profoundly individual as a human voice” (Pinsky 18). This is extended by Susan Stewart to elaborate upon “this social presence” (Pinsky 18). She says: “Lyric brings forward, as the necessary precondition of its creation of a world of ‘I’s’ and ‘you’s’ in mutual recognition, this place of language as the foundation of intersubjectivity and intersubjectivity as the foundation for the

recognition of persons” (Steward 47). Rich, Pinsky, and Stewart “provide a model for democratic interaction” (Riley 349). Riley elaborates upon this idea. She says:

For Rich, poetry is the space that enables us to know ourselves and to (re)experience the conditions under which we live, as well as undertake the creation of new ideas and ways of perceiving the world—all necessary components to the continual maintenance and transformation of democracy (350).

The “conceptual pivot” of Grossberg’s *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* is that there are various “historically specific events and the relational contexts” that need to be studied closely to find “profound transformation in ‘Euro-modernity’ that shape lived experiences and ‘structures of feeling’” (Grossberg 101). This can be readily instanced from Rich’s work, where she intensely focuses upon traumatic events in world history and American imperialism in places like Vietnam, or Nicaragua, or the Arab World, where U.S. coercion and hegemony traumatized people, imperiling the very existence of the natives, since the poet’s concern as always was to envision an egalitarian world.

Susan Stewart (*Poetry and the Fate of the Sense* 2002) clarifies the functioning of the aesthetic through the employment of metaphor in poetry. She says:

Poetic metaphor is at the center of form-giving activity in any aesthetic practice; it enables us to mediate and entertain at once our capacities for sense impressions and abstraction and to imagine, through both memory and projection, forms beyond the contingent circumstances of our immediate experience (Stewart 41).

Rich also thinks about metaphor in poetry on similar lines. She says that metaphor “lies close

to the core of poetry itself, the only hope for a humane civil life. The eye of likeness in the midst of contrast, the appeal to recognition, the association of thing to thing, spiritual fact with embodied form, begins here” (Rich, *What is Found There* 6). She goes on to say that the “great muscle of metaphor draws strength from resemblance in difference” (Rich, *Poetry and Commitment* 32-33). Riley explains the employment and usefulness of metaphor in poetry. She says: “metaphor itself is not only a powerful tool, but it is also democratic, open to interpretations developed collaboratively by the poet, readers, and poem, creating new ways of seeing and knowing” (Riley 350). Riley terms this strategy in Rich’s poetry as a “collaborative act” (350) whereby in Rich’s poetry “begins the suggestion of multiple, many-layered, rather than singular, meanings, wherever we look, in the ordinary world” (Rich, *What is Found There* 6). Riley goes on to expatiate upon this technique in poetry. She says: “Within these layered meanings lie the intersubjective moments of shared experiences and ideas that shape the heart of democracy—the beliefs and practices, those agreed upon and disagreed upon, of the ‘ordinary world’” (Riley 350-51). She explains that over the years Rich’s poetry has not only envisioned intricacies of democratic processes, it has gradually come to manifest in itself the voice of the nation. Riley says:

Rich’s poetry of multi-layered meanings provides a constant shifting of images and multi-voiced discourses embedded in various historical moments past and present that create a complex, contradictory art. This complex and contradictory poetics models the complexities of our democratic processes, and Rich, since the 1986 publication

of *Your Native Land, Your Life*, has increasingly developed a national voice (351).

Such volumes “document her search for self-identity and understanding, as well as the search for her place within her country’s history” (351). Poems in *Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991) “engage readers in conversations of civic responsibility and a search to understand our responsibilities to the communities, both local and global, around us” (351). Riley says that “Rich’s national voice . . . extends” through the publication of *Dark Fields of the Republic* (1995). She finds reasons for this extension in the volume. Riley says:

The collection [*Dark Fields of the Republic*] contemplates the fleeting and imaginary nature of the American Dream, as well as the lost or ignored moments of American history. The collection also asks large questions: What is freedom? How is freedom created and sustained? In what ways does a life bend, or not, toward freedom? (351).

*Midnight Salvage* came in 1999. It posed questions like: “What is it we bring with us into the next century? What is worth saving? What is worth leaving behind?” (351). The collection continued with Rich’s characteristic inclination for “mapping of experience.” It is reminiscent of her 1977 poem “Diving into the Wreck,” to “see the damage that was done/and the treasures that prevail . . . the wreck and not the story of the wreck/the thing itself and not the myth” (Rich, *Diving into the Wreck*, passim 56,57,62,63). The poet is not afraid of confronting the “wreck,” she even steps forward to embrace this wreck, and herein lie “processes vital to democracy.” Riley enumerates these “processes” and characteristics as “engagement, reflection,

and accountability for one's relationship to and for one's community and historical presence" (Riley 351). Even otherwise, Rich's poetry is replete with the "historical" sense. Indeed, she espouses not only national but international concerns, articulating global problems of inequality and mal distribution of wealth. She takes up the questions posed by Karl Marx, and feels that they are "still alive and pulsing." She says:

What is social wealth? How do the conditions of human labor infiltrate other social relationships? What would it require for people to live and work together in conditions of racial equality? How much inequality will we tolerate in the world's richest and most powerful nation? Why and how have these and similar questions become discredited in public discourse? (Rich, *Arts of the Possible* 102).

Thus, Rich finds immense potential in poetry, since poetry reclaims language for itself. It meaningfully engages with the world around it, leading to, most notably, cultural growth. Rich takes pains to explain this aspect of poetry. She says:

For now, poetry has the capacity—in its own ways and by its own means—to remind us of something we are forbidden to see. A forgotten future: a still-uncreated site whose moral architecture is founded not on ownership and dispossession, the subjection of women, torture and bribes, outcast and tribe, but on the continuous redefining of freedom—the word now held under house arrest by the rhetoric of the 'free' market. This ongoing future, written off over and over, is still within view. All over the world its paths are being rediscovered and invented:

through collective action, through many kinds of art (Rich, *Poetry and Commitment* 36).

James Scully discusses poetry to differentiate between "political" poetry and "dissident" poetry. He says: "the bottom line is that all poetry is political as it bears a set of assumptions about the organization and priorities of life, and carries with it a whole network of lives interpenetrating it, just as it interpenetrates life. Even its silences—sometimes especially the silences—have political content (Scully 2-3). "Dissident" poetry is one that goes against "the dominant ideological grain." It "does not respect boundaries between private and public, self and other." He goes on to say that such poetry breaks boundaries, and it also "breaks silences: speaking for, or at best *with*, the silenced; opening poetry up, putting it in the middle of life rather than shunting it off into a corner. It is a poetry that talks back, that would act as part of the world, not simply as a mirror of it" (4). A large part of Rich's poetry, according to Scully, falls in the latter category, as her poetry acts "as part of the world," impelling inhabitants to be in relation with each other, and not remain isolatoes. It is through these concerns that Rich's poetry influences the national spirit of democracy and the American people. She speaks of it in a persuasive manner in the essay entitled "Permeable Membrane (2005)," where she says:

Is poetry, should it be political? The question, for me, evaporates once it's acknowledged that poetic imagination or intuition is never merely unto-itself, free-floating, or self-enclosed. It's radical, meaning, root-tangled in the grit of human arrangements and relationships: *how we are with each other*. The medium is language intensified, intensifying our sense of possible reality (96).

Such faith in poetry and its possibilities was expressed in the beginning of the twenty-first century and it is manifest in her later verse volumes also. Rich believed that there is a subtle “dynamic” between the movements of life and its expression in art. She underlined it as:

... a vital dynamic between art—here I speak particularly of writing, a seizing of language, a transformation of subjectivity—and the continuing life of movements for social transformation. Where language and images help us name and recognize ourselves and our condition, and practical activity for liberation renews and challenges art, there is a complementarity as necessary as the circulation of the blood (Rich, *Arts of the Possible* 154).

This socio-political concern in Rich’s poetic work has been the need of the hour, since mere academic verse may have fallen by the wayside. Riley not only agrees with this but also demonstrates its relevance with a certain amount of zest. She says:

... the social presence of poetry, calls us to action, engages our senses, challenges our apathy, and enters us into the ebb and flow of the world. In a time of violence, economic unrest, and a changing global world, Rich’s poetry shows us how poetry can influence readers, who in turn can reinvigorate our democracy by salvaging history, reimagining who we are and might be, pushing us to survive and rebuild the ruins of our democracy (Riley 362)

It was in an interview that Grossberg, (who published *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* 2010) outlined the aims and objectives of cultural studies in the contemporary domain. He said: “. . . the ‘object’ that concerns cultural studies is the

context of social life itself, a context that can only be understood as a set of interwoven relationships. We have to find theories of relationality!” (D’Arcy 112). It is Rich’s poetry that functions as a veritable theory of relationality. It takes the “context of social life” for analysis and critiquing in verse. Her poetry cuts the gordian knot of “interwoven relationships” to perspectivize the contemporary scenario with considerable candour. Her poetry is quite relevant because, as Grossberg says: “in the contemporary world, culture seems to have taken on the role of a primary agent of social transformation. This is precisely what we need to understand” (112). He goes on to explain the functioning of cultural studies in some detail. He says:

Cultural studies chooses to embrace the complexity, to argue that you cannot understand the human world except by mapping the multiplicity of relations that constitute any context, and any event within it. So, rather than looking for *the* answer, rather than thinking dis-junctively (it is either *a* or *b*), cultural studies thinks conjunctively (it is *a* and *b* and . . .) (112).

In the terms of Grossberg, Rich also thinks “conjunctively.” She, in her entire *oeuvre* has striven dynamically towards “mapping the multiplicity of relations.” Indeed, Rich’s poetry is most topical, since she never loses sight of the local and global disparities and through her work indulges in acts of cartography to present a democratic vista that is inclusive of the first world and the third world, the developed and the developing, the rich and the poor. This panoramic view of people and places, this all inclusive sympathy and candour endears her to readers, who read avidly and feel empowered, since she is attempting to retrieve the space of the other that has been usurped by the Self. Men, women, white, black or brown

tend to identify with her vision of an egalitarian world. It was at the turn of the century that Rich expressed in prose what she attempted in poetry all through. She argued in favour of the cause cogently and sincerely. She said that there exists a “vital dynamic between art . . . and the continuing life of movements for social transformation (Rich, *Arts of the Possible* 154). Rich says that “language and images help us name and recognize ourselves and our condition,” and this “practical activity for liberation renews and challenges art.” Indeed, she says that “there is a complementarity as necessary as the circulation of the blood” (154). Rich opined that “poetic imagination or intuition is never merely unto-itself, free floating, or self-enclosed.” Poetic imagination, according to Rich, is “radical, meaning, root-tangled in the grit of human arrangements and relationships.”

Rich spent considerable time explaining that poetry makes “a huge difference” in life. She elaborated upon it in an interview with Matthew Rothschild. Rich said: “I happen to think [poetry] makes a huge difference. Other people’s poetry has made a huge difference in my life. It has changed the way I saw the world. It has changed the way I felt the world. It has changed the way I have understood another human being” (Rothschild 34). Riley, while commenting upon the interview feels that it is “this power,” that “empowers” the readers (Riley 354). She goes on to elaborate that “the power of art to affect an audience, to reach out and form a collective” emerges from her works. Earlier on in the interview with Rothschild Rich had espoused poetry as “the effort to find ways of humanely dealing with each other—as groups or as individuals,” leading to a vision of “the breaking down of barriers of oppression, tradition, culture, ignorance, fear,

self-protectiveness” (Rothschild 35). Such “breaking down leads beyond isolation to a space of shared, common endeavour, a space necessary to the sustenance of democratic processes” (Riley 354). This explains the core, the very central concern of Adrienne Rich’s verse and prose writings.

### Works Cited

1. D’Arcy, Chantal Cornut-Gentile and Lawrence Grossberg. “An Interview with Lawrence Grossberg: Personal Reflections on the Politics and Practice of Cultural Studies.” *Atlantis*, Vol.32, No. 2 (December 2010): 107-20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41055402>. Web.
2. Dunayevskaya, Raya. *Rosa Luxemburg: Women’s Liberation, Marxist Philosophy of Revolution*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991. Print.
3. Grossberg, Lawrence. *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University, Press, 2010. Print.
4. Haven, Cynthia L. “The Suffering of Others: On Adrienne Rich.” *VQR: A National Journal of Literature and Discussion* 89.3 (Summer 2013): Print.
5. Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976. Print.
6. Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*. Vol.37, London: Intl, 1998. Print.
7. Pinsky, Robert. *Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. Print.

8. Rich, Adrienne. Rich, Adrienne. "Storm Warnings." *A Change of World*. New York: Norton, 1951. Print
9. ---. "Diving into the Wreck," *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*. New York: Norton, 1973: 22-24. Print.
10. ---. "North American Time." *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems*. NY: Norton, 1986. Print.
11. ---. "Through Corralitos Under the Rolls of Cloud." *An Atlas of the Difficult World*. New York: Norton, 1991. Print.
12. ---. "Blood, Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet." *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi. New York: Norton, 1993. Print.
13. ---. *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*. New York: Norton, 1973; rpt. *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*. New York: Norton, 1993. Print.
14. ---. *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. New York: Norton, 1993. Print.
15. ---. *Collected Early Poems: 1950-1970*. New York: Norton, 1995. Print.
16. ---. *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.
17. ---. "Arts of the Possible." *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*. New York: Norton, 2001:146-67. Print.
18. ---. "Defying the Space That Separates." *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.
19. ---. "Poetry and the Public Sphere." *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.
20. ---. "Raya Dunayevskaya's Marx." *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*. New York: Norton, 2001: 83-114. Print.
21. ---. *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950-2001*. New York: Norton, 2002. Print.
22. ---. *Poetry and Commitment: An Essay*. New York: Norton, 2007. Print.
23. ---. "Permeable Membrane." *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society, 1997-2008*. New York: Norton, 2009: 96-99. Print. Riley, Jeannette E. "The Voice of Poetry is Calling: Adrienne Rich's Democratic Impulse." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 92.3/4. (Fall/Winter 2009): 347-64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41179252>. Web.
24. Rothschild, Matthew. *The Progressive* 58.1 (1994): 31 (5). *Expanded Academic ASAP*. 9 Oct. 2006. <http://find.galegroup.com.libproxy.umassd.edu> Web.
25. Scully, James. *Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 2005. Print.
26. Stewart, Susan. *Poetry and the Fate of the Sense*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002. Print.