

Challenging female roles and spaces: Adrienne Rich's of woman born. Motherhood as experience and institution



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Resumen: Being a woman has traditionally meant pigeonholing in certain roles and spheres that have been determined from the outside by a patriarchal hegemonic system that has tried to keep women away from the public, cultural, and intellectual life and, therefore, from decision-making. This has led women to both subalternity and personal and social silencing: women had to stay at home and fulfill secondary roles always subordinate to those of men: housekeeper, wife and mother. Motherhood has therefore become not merely an option that, obviously, only women can carry out if they desire to, but it has been imposed on them, considering that a woman who is not a mother is not a woman at all.

In her work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, published in 1976, American writer Adrienne Rich presents for the first time a study on motherhood in which it does not appear as an idealized experience, but in which the political aspects of motherhood are broken down instead. It offers an interesting distinction between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood, and invites us to reflect on the oppression that being mothers in the way that the system dictates that they should be entails for women.

This article has the aim of analyzing the main issues that this non fiction work contributes to feminist studies, analyzing the different impositions that are made on women through motherhood from a feminist perspective.

Keywords: Adrienne Rich, Feminist studies, Gender roles, Motherhood

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ABSTRACT

Being a woman has traditionally meant pigeonholing in certain roles and spheres that have been determined from the outside by a patriarchal hegemonic system that has tried to keep women away from the public, cultural, and intellectual life and, therefore, from decision-making. This has led women to both subalternity and personal and social silencing: women had to stay at home and fulfill secondary roles always subordinate to those of men: housekeeper, wife and

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KEYWORDS

Adrienne Rich – Feminist studies – Gender roles – Motherhood

Introduction

Seclusion in certain spaces and spheres has been and is still a reality that only part of the population, the female population, has suffered throughout history. This spatial seclusion imposed by the patriarchal system has also meant the assignment of certain isolating roles that have had to be occupied only by women: mother, housekeeper and wife. This has brought with it an oppression and silencing which has had serious consequences for women, since occupying these roles has served to keep them subjugated and subordinated to the decisions and power that has been only in the hands of men.

There are many women authors who have tried to subvert these hegemonic orders through literature: either by creating multidimensional female characters in their works of fiction that account for and serve as examples of the different ways of being a woman and representing femininity or making a direct criticism of the unequal hierarchy of power in society and the role that women have occupied in it. That is precisely what the author to whom this article is dedicated, Adrienne Rich, intends to do through her literature, both in her poetry, in which she develops openly feminist poems that try to rebel against established female roles, and in her essays, in which she theorizes about the situation of women and which have meant an important contribution to feminist literary criticism in the United States and all around the world.

Before delving into the analysis of the ways in which Rich reflects on motherhood in her work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), it is worth reviewing some details of Rich's life and work as a writer and as an activist.

Adrienne Rich

Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1929, into a traditional family, the daughter of a renowned doctor and a pianist. Since she was a child she felt a passion for reading and writing and, encouraged by her father, she began to write poems that imitated the style and form of the poets that he had instilled in her. She continued to nurture her talent throughout her youth and she graduated from Radcliffe University in 1951, with a BA in English Studies. She married young, at the age of 24, to an Economics Professor with whom she had three children. Later in her life she would confess that she had married, in part, to

leave her first home, and in her first years of married life she already began to feel the scourge of living within the conventions of motherhood and marriage. This caused her more than one emotional and identity crisis, as she felt trapped in a role in which she was completely uncomfortable and from which she did not quite know how to escape. This feeling of oppression and this longing for liberation appear as recurring themes in her work, which often examines and challenges social norms, patriarchal hegemony and power differences in the world – both between social classes and between women and men.

Her feeling of oppression came at a time, the 60s, when many other women in the United States and around the world were starting to share those same feelings, becoming conscious for the first time of the fact that they had been living under unfair impositions that were in no way natural to them as women, but impositions that patriarchy had created for them instead. The motto of the third wave feminism becomes the wellknown quote “The personal is political”, and this motto implies a call to action through solidarity among women who, by verbalizing and sharing their experiences, realize that they are victims of the same mechanisms of oppression and therefore their struggle must be collective. The history of women, including their experiences as mothers, wives and sexual beings, needs to be rewritten with a new consciousness that is born from reflection and theorization based on the experiences of all women.

So Rich, being more and more aware of her subalternity and feeling suffocated by family life, decided to leave her husband after 17 years of marriage; he ended up committing suicide a year later. Six years after, she started a new life with a woman and publicly declared herself a lesbian. This marked a fundamental change in her personal and professional life. It was from that moment on that she began to write the most notable works, both poetic and essayistic, of her literary career and it was that stage that consecrated her as an essential representative of feminist and lesbian activism in the United States. But her commitment was always intersectional; we must not forget that in parallel she continued to do social activism through events, demonstrations and declarations against the war (especially about the “nonsense” of the Vietnam War), capitalism, the cruelty of governments, etc., and all this was also reflected in one way or another in her literary production.

Rich died in 2012, leaving behind a legacy of works (mainly of poetry) that continue to represent, for the most part, some of the most relevant feminist and lesbian discourse in American literature in the recent years.

Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976)

One of the issues that most concerned Rich was the liberation of women from the supposedly feminine roles imposed by an oppressive patriarchal society and this was reflected in her works, both essays and poetry. The impact of these works on feminist theory was enormous, because although the topic most frequently explored by Rich was that of female language, this topic had already been explored by many other theorists before and after Rich and, therefore, they were important contributions to already widely developed theories. However, the liberation of women from male's domination touches on so many aspects that we can affirm that this was the underlying topic under every theme that she developed.

In order to understand the root and the reasoning behind male domination, it is useful to look at other theories such as that of the French theorist and

philosopher Pierre Bourdieu. In his work *The male domination* (2000), he argues that the system of power in the world is based precisely on that male domination—that is, on the biological difference and the supposed superiority of men over women—but that this domination based on biological difference is nothing more than a construct created by patriarchal society that is extrapolated to all other aspects of it, thus perpetuating said relationship of domination. In other words, according to Bourdieu (2000), domination, which begins within the traditional domestic unit, extends to “instances such as the School or the State—places of elaboration and imposition of domination principles that are practiced in the interior of the most private of universes—” (p. 15, my translation). Therefore, the “masculine”—understanding by masculine also any institution created from a patriarchal system, from the base of the self-positioning of man in power—dominates each one of the areas that make up a modern society.

In Bourdieu’s theory, and extremely relevant as well for Rich’s theories on motherhood and mothering, the body takes on paramount importance, since it is the differences between male and female bodies that determine each and every one of the intimate and social behaviors of people; sex, belonging to the public and the private, the external aspect, labor incorporation, etc., establish the relationship of superiority of the masculine over the feminine based on biological difference: “The body has its front part, place of sexual difference, and its rear part, undifferentiated sexuality, and potentially feminine, that is, passive, subdued” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 30, my translation).

Rich is affected by a type of domination that in her case is double: for being a woman and for being a lesbian, and she refuses to contribute to this invisibility, being aware that the space established for her in the dominant social hierarchy is no more than a construct and therefore can be subverted; Rich intends to transgress the order of male domination through her literature because, as we know, for her poetry is political and cannot be separated from it in any way.

This impulse to enter, with other humans, through language, into the order and disorder of the world, is poetic at its root as surely as it is political at its root. Poetry and politics both have to do with description and with power. And so, of course, does power (Rich, 1993, p. 6).

But what does Rich understand by politics? Everything that transcends individuality and becomes part of the collective mechanisms that, almost always, are assimilated as universal within parameters marked by power. The values, the customs that we understand as traditionally related to a context or a society and that pretend to appear natural, intrinsic to us, actually have some implications, some indoctrinating intentions with the ultimate goal of turning us into one more piece of a gear that can only work by applying them. Rich (1986b) extends it to all areas of society:

The politics of pregnability and motherhood. The politics of orgasm. The politics of rape and incest, of abortion, birth control, forcible sterilization. Of prostitution and marital sex. Of what had been named sexual liberation. Of prescriptive heterosexuality. Of lesbian existence (p. 9).

Everything is political, including (or mainly) literature. And we can well understand them as impositions or use them as tools of rebellion and subversion. And that’s what Rich intended to do through her writings, especially the ones about the roles associated with women (particularly that of motherhood).

Those writings were pioneers in the treatment of motherhood from a feminist perspective, producing a theoretical work that is still nowadays considered essential in this area of study.

In her work entitled *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience And Institution* (1976), the first theoretical work written after her divorce, she reflects in detail on the conventions imposed on women regarding their obligations as wife and mother, but also about the fact that all of us, men and women, are born of a woman and share that unique experience of feeling for the first time both love and disappointment from a woman and how that determines our future identity. In the case of men, this creates a sort of dependency that they are unable to assimilate and that they try to counteract in their adult life and, in the case of women, it has an impact that had been impossible to gather until now since women had always been denied the voice and the word to define the world and their experiences.

Rich reflects on her own experience as a mother of three children and manages to extrapolate that experience to that of all women who are mothers with the intention of theorizing about motherhood and the different ideological and political dimensions attributed to it by the hegemonic system. Specifically, Rich intends to dismantle certain facts that the patriarchal system is interested in presenting as incontestable:

Unexamined assumptions: First, that a “natural” mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace turned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless” (Rich, 1986, p. 22).

Rich presents alternatives to these roles that are assigned to women and, although the issues she addresses are many and varied, it is worth noting her treatment and analysis of the following: motherhood as a form of oppression, mother’s guilt, the reclaiming of women’s bodies and birth rights and the artist mother.

Motherhood as a source of oppression

One of Rich’s main objectives in her work *Of Woman Born* (1976) is to reflect on motherhood as an institution whose function is to oppress women and keep them within the dominant patriarchal system. This fact is, like any other type of oppression, a form of violence and abuse against women, a kind of premeditated manipulation that deprives them of the opportunity to develop themselves as free and autonomous beings in the society of which they are a part.

the mothers, if we could look into their fantasies —their daydreams and imaginary experiences— we would see the embodiment of rage, of tragedy, of the overcharged energy of love, of inventive desperation, we would see the machinery of institutional violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood (Rich, 1986, p. 280).

The undeniable fact is that motherhood, a pure and uniquely female experience, has been confiscated from women in many areas and fields of study, from History to Anthropology or Psychology, always being analyzed, studied and observed from a patriarchal lens incapable of recounting or describing in the first person an experience which they have never lived. This concept leads Rich to make a distinction between, on the one hand, the experience of motherhood,

which she describes as “the potential relationship of any women to her powers of reproduction and to children” (p. 13) and the institution of motherhood, which she describes as “ensuring that that potential —and all women— shall remain under male control” (p. 13). This distinction is essential to understanding the institutionalization of women’s bodies and of a totally natural experience for the benefit of the hegemonic system, and Rich was one of the first theorists to allude to it. Rich pinpoints that:

Far from reflecting a “natural” state of woman, the “institution of motherhood” is an artificial construct that was “invented” by “patriarchy.” Patriarchy silences women, particularly mothers, as well as what both men and women define as “maternal” or “feminine” in themselves. This silence has been historically enforced through male-dominated professions. (Randall, 2004, p. 197).

The allusion to the artificial aspect of the institution of motherhood is paramount, as it knocks down the fallacy of motherhood, and every stereotype of patience, kindness, selflessness, suffering, etc. that is linked to women who are mothers, raising awareness to the fact that it is the patriarchal system that has made us believe that there is no other way of being a woman than being a mother and no other way of being a mother than to do it following and sticking to these rules and traits.

Despite using her own experience, as we have already pointed out, as the basis for her theorizing about motherhood, Rich is careful and refrains from making generalizations, consistent with her intersectional feminism in which the experience of all women, of all races, social classes, economic and social status, religion, etc. is taken into account equally, analyzing her experiences as a lesbian and white woman and assuming that her experience of motherhood is privileged over that of other women, such as black women from marginalized neighborhoods and belonging to the working class, who very likely have experienced motherhood in an even harsher and more violent way than her.

This analysis that Rich makes of motherhood is purely feminist and it deals with issues that are still highly relevant today since they are still topical and continue to represent a struggle that women must exercise to break down the barriers that even today they are trying to impose. This work was reedited in 1986, ten years after its original publication, and in the introduction to this new edition Rich recalls the reasons that led her to write such a work, to question an institution hitherto unquestioned, concluding that her motives were strictly political:

It seemed to me that the devaluation of women in other spheres and the pressures of women to validate themselves in maternity deserved exploration. I wanted to examine motherhood —my own included— in a social context, as embedded in a political institution: in feminist terms (Rich, 1986, p. ix).

The obligation of motherhood itself, since there is no place in the patriarchal system for a woman who freely chooses not to be a mother (“Women who refuse to become mothers are not merely emotionally suspect, but are dangerous. Not only do they refuse to continue the species; they also deprive society of its emotional leaven —the suffering of the mother” (Rich, 1986, p. 164)), but also the subjugation of those women who do become mothers of being and doing it in the terms in which that system dictates for them concern Rich and

this leads her to consider motherhood as an institution imposed on women by patriarchy not only to perpetuate the species, but to keep them within the roles and spaces assigned to them and outside the external, public, masculine spaces and environments.

Rich notes that motherhood has a history and an ideology that are “essential to the patriarchal system” and she succinctly notes that “Certainly the mother serves the interests of patriarchy: she exemplifies in one person religion, social conscience, and nationalism. Institutional motherhood revives and renews all other institutions (O’Reilly, 2004, p. 45).

Motherly guilt

Another extremely controversial element that Rich analyzes in *Of Woman Born* is that of the guilt that every mother experiences in the face of feelings that, although they are common in the maternal experience, are rarely verbalized due to the challenge they pose to the role of a good mother. The clash of women’s personal desires with the political weight of becoming aware of motherhood as an institution causes in them this feeling of guilt that Rich illustrates like this in her work:

My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness. Sometimes I seem to myself, in my feelings toward these tiny guiltless beings, a monster of selfishness and intolerance. Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair at my own failures, despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted. And I am weak sometimes from held-in rage. There are times when I feel only death will free us from one another, when I envy the barren woman who has the luxury of her regrets but lives a life of privacy and freedom (Rich, 1986, p. 21).

This excerpt from her personal diaries that Rich includes in *Of Woman Born* is clear evidence of the contradictory feelings and, above all, of the guilt she feels towards her children and the mother role that she developed. It becomes obvious that this feeling of guilt is one more weapon of the patriarchal system, since by imposing not only motherhood but also the guidelines and expectations on how to be a good mother, it seeks to isolate women, distance them from the public sphere and dictate to them how to mother: showing unconditional love and putting your body and time at the disposal of your children. But, in addition, this imposition includes an idealization of motherhood whereby women are also denied the freedom to experience any negative feelings towards those creatures for which they are completely responsible.

Rich acknowledges, instead, feeling resentment and suffering often towards her children, feelings that are “forbidden” for a mother. Those feelings are the basis of her guilt, because a mother who resents her children is not only a bad mother, as she distances herself from the stereotype of the mother pre-established by the system, but she is also a bad woman, because for that system to be a woman implies being a mother. “This [being a mother] is what women have always done” (26); this, says Rich, was the main reason for her to be a mother; to fit in, to be included within what she was supposed to do to be considered a

woman, in a time and at an age when she had not yet taken the step of rebelling against such impositions.

The reclaiming of birth

Another point reflected in *Of Woman Born* which is of extreme importance and relevance still today is the way in which patriarchy and, therefore, men, assume control over women's bodies. Motherhood is once again the perfect excuse to exercise that control by appealing to the sublimity and the natural miracle that gives women the ability to create life within their bodies. However, for Rich: "There is nothing revolutionary whatsoever about the control of women's bodies by men. The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (Rich, 1986, p. 55). This still remains true today, as we see how rooms full of men make decisions about women's reproductive rights and how, even in childbirth, mothers have to fight to have their bodies considered and their labor choices respected in a world where women are very often considered mere vessels of a being that the system will try to indoctrinate and use for the perpetuation of the patriarchal values; a world where we still have to denounce that "women's rights are human rights"².

In *Of Woman Born*, on the other hand, Rich advocates the reappropriation of their bodies and, therefore, the right to decide over them by women. Rich includes here both the power of decision on the part of women on whether to be mothers or not, and a criticism of the obstetric violence that is exercised especially at the time of childbirth on women who decide to be mothers. Also, as O'Reilly notes,

Rich locates the solution to mothers' traditional lack of "autonomy" (here understood as the prerequisite for "choice") in the repossession by women of their bodies, which in Rich's view have been wrested away from them by patriarchy. In particular, she foregrounds the issue of birth control as a vital factor in this proposed reclaiming of female corporeality (O'Reilly, 1997, p. 76).

It is not surprising that this work by Rich received great rejection on the part of the most conservative spheres, who saw a great challenge to tradition in the way that she questioned patriarchal power. Sheridan (2006, p. 29) describes it as follows:

The rage, I believe, was sparked by the critical dimension of this book — its naming of patriarchy as the problem with motherhood, its examination of the ways male power is exercised— rather than its focus on women's suffering, filtered through the writer's own experiences as a mother.

The artist mother

Despite the claims that Rich makes in this work, which are clear and more than evident, there is a specific issue that the theory points out to the detriment of the way in which she defines motherhood. And it is that Rich seems to somehow ignore the defense of the role of the artist mother, of motherhood as a powerful resource to subvert through literature. Thus Rich, in her own facet as a writer, makes little use of her maternal experience as a source of inspiration and, in her essays, fails to find a special subversive power in motherhood; quite the contrary, her facets as mother and artist are completely separated because, when she writes, she does so not as a mother but in spite of being a mother: "For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one's mother, where I existed as myself" (Rich, 1986, p. 31).

This certainly serves as a vindication of the maintaining of a woman's own individuality even after one becomes a mother, a fact that, however obvious it may seem now, was not always clear in the way women were treated. As we have pointed out throughout this article, under the patriarchal system's idea of what it means to be a mother, to be one meant putting aside all your personal needs, all your individual desires and the essence of the person that you are to dedicate yourself entirely to your children.

However vindicative this aspect is, the fact that she separates her mother self from her artist self takes away power from motherhood. Rich highlights the fact that, in her case, only when her children grow up does she feel the freedom to create again since her life as a mother deprives her of the material possibility of writing but also of the ability to think intellectually and creatively:

[Written in August 1958] ... I have to acknowledge to myself that I would not have chosen to have more children, that I was beginning to look to a time, not too far off, when I should again be free, no longer so physically tired, pursuing a more or less intellectual and creative life... The only way I can develop now is through much harder, more continuous, connected work than my present life makes possible. Another child means postponing this for some years longer. And years at my age are significant, not to be tossed lightly away (Rich, 1986, p. 28).

The criticism in these statements is, again, evident. The conciliation of women is a utopia and women are forced to choose between being mothers or working, most of them choosing the first option at the time when Rich wrote *Of Woman Born* since this was what their mothers and their grandmothers did.

twentieth-century, educated young woman, looking perhaps at her mother's life, or trying to create an autonomous self in a society which insists that she is destined primarily for reproduction, has with good reason felt that the choice was an inescapable either/or: motherhood or individuation, motherhood or creativity, motherhood or freedom (Rich, 1986, p. 160).

Conclusions

The analysis carried out in this article allows us to conclude that Rich's work is constituent of a political and ideological discourse both within feminist and lesbian literary criticism that makes her an essential figure within these movements, not only in the literary sphere but also in general feminist thought. We have been able to illustrate the impact of Rich's work on it, her contribution to theory with her essays which contain pioneering reflections, such as that of motherhood as an institution, and her consequent elevation to canonical author in literature written by women.

In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich questions everything that was considered natural for a woman in the United States in the 70s: seclusion in the domestic sphere and belonging to certain roles that were extremely difficult to escape, such as those that involved serving both husband and system: wife, housekeeper, and mother.

Through *Of Woman Born*, Rich tells a story that invites reflection on her differentiation between the experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood, the latter being an imposition that only serves to oppress and control women, their lives and their bodies. In doing so, Rich paves the way for the feminist fight for women's autonomy and for freedom of choice over their lives and their bodies.

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