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Showalter's Gynocriticism: Female Wild Zone of Experience in Adrienne Rich's *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*

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Abstract

A gynocritic contrives a cultural locus of female literary identity, describing the forces that intersect women writers' cultural field in relation to the social context in which they occur. Looking from the perspective of Showalter's gynocriticism, the present study aims at expounding Rich's *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* as a female text source of strength which can make its own symbols, creating a wild zone of experience, for articulating female issues as an opposition to the restrictions of male tradition. The main finding of the research is that Rich, using genuine female aesthetics in a Female space, brings into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness.

Key Words: Elaine Showalter, gynocriticism, wild zone, Adrienne Rich, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*.

Moving in line with feminism, uncompromising female writers, having been half-frightened by the spectacle of an art which moves closely upon the edge of the mainstream of male writings, by "turning within" begin to develop a new manner of writing, insistently female, which "celebrates a new consciousness." Through this thoroughly female art form women let go of the male and rather stick totally to their own female experiences, values and grievances. They try to unify the fragments of female experience through artistic vision. Showalter, quoting Woolf, elaborates more on this attitude of female writing saying that "[i]t is courageous; it is sincere; it keeps closely to what women feel. It is not bitter. It does not insist upon its femininity. But at the same time, a woman's book is not written as a man would write it." Through this art form women look at men as outsiders. They consider men's writings as "sterile, egocentric, and self-deluding." Feminist writers believe that the entire literary tradition, which men had a monopoly over, has misinterpreted feminine reality. (ALTO 240-43) Therefore, women try to present female reality as it really is not as it has already been presented by male literary writers and critics.

Hence, Rich in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, moving towards the female aesthetic in her writings especially after 1970s turns to redefine the female. In this volume Rich tries to speak of women, either women of consequence or anonymous ones, as they would like to be heard. This volume is filled with *women's* texts, including letters, messages, diaries, speeches, epigraphs, monographs, essays, and even fragments. Calling for the words and images of such women as Ethel Rosenberg, Willa Cather, Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, Emily Dickinson, her grandmothers and even her mother-in-law, Rich creates a

"woman-identified/ woman-addressed text-given world" allowing women to speak "as they themselves would be heard" (Mandelbaum 287-8). Therefore, the poems of *A Wild Patience* are mostly dedicated to Rich's either public or private heroines, female mythological figures, or anonymous southern tribes who, because of a male-dominated culture, were unable to make a lasting contribution to their society and have been quietly erased from the face of history. Referring to such a change in Rich's poetry Vendler asserts

What we call, from the outside, a 'conversion' is often seen by the person experiencing it, not as a change from an old self to a new one, but as the discovery of the authentic self that had been there all along, but had been forced into hiding by pressure from familial or social structure, structures experiencing as intolerably powerful, even annihilating. (370)

Rich now through embracing women turns to what has been hidden in her, the creative female artist. She now becomes a female poet who reclaims the "spiritual and poetic dimensions of her legacy in the female tradition" (Langdell 154).

The fact that she aspires to redefine Dickinson, for instance, and claim for her, as a female writer's, already trampled rights is emblematic of such a direction in Rich's writing. Rich in *A Wild Patience*, trying to protect Dickinson from interpretive comments by all scholars who claim to know her, sets to represent Dickinson with her own words as a female writer not as she is defined, or better to say as she is interpreted, by the male writers and critics. Thus, in "The Spirit of Place" Rich addresses Dickinson to rescue her from all intrusions and her memory from the oversimplified and trivialized picture that the male "experts" have created. (Mandelbaum 287-8)

with the hands of a daughter I would cover you
from all intrusion even my own
saying rest to your ghost

with the hands of a sister I would leave your hands
open or closed as they prefer to lie
and ask no more of who or why or wherefore

with the hands of a mother I would close the door
on the rooms you've left behind
and silently pick up my fallen work (*A Wild Patience* 43)

Not letting the truths of women's lives, including that of Dickinson, be obliterated again by the patriarchy, Rich calls for a pure female art as it existed in the past and as it still dwells in the hearts of women not as it is presented by patriarchy.

Considering such an attitude in female writings, Showalter observes that women find the (literary) world thoroughly polarized by the male so they fight to win a part of the male knowledge and aesthetics. Having won it, female writers come to understand that there are other "better" ways of knowing which they know as the female aesthetics. Women were forced all over the history to use the male art forms not because it was superior but because it was the "dominant" form but through feminist movement especially after 1970s female writers turn to purely female aesthetics totally independent of the male art forms and aesthetics. The female aesthetics is, therefore, meant for women's survival. Female writers,

trying to define an authentic self, turn to "female consciousness" and female literary tradition which they have already held within. (ALTO 247-57) Showalter illustrates such an attitude in female writing through cultural model of gynocriticism especially through the idea of female wild zone of experience which will be explicated in the following section.

Cultural Model of Gynocriticism: Showalter's Wild Zone in Rich's *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*

Form is not simply "a matter of an individual writer's creative choices." All forms of expression and representation acquire their meanings and values, independent of content, throughout a historical and cultural process. (Strine 28) Such a process, being totally masculine, imposed a masculine form of writing on female writers' literary works throughout history. Rich criticizes civilization for censoring women and for relying so much on the subordination of women. Hence, having lost her faith in civilization and culture, Rich from 1970s onwards turns to "define the human in terms of the female" (Vanderbosch 114). Her primary purpose is to fight the masculine culture's denial of her identity which affected the form and manner of her writing as a woman who followed the masculine-defined forms and values which governed her first period of literary creativity. Thus, along with condemning the patriarchal domination, Rich nurtures the practice of a female wild zone, both in form and content of her poetry in *A Wild Patience*.

Showalter mentions the same point in women's history of literary creation saying that women have traditionally been considered as "sociological chameleons" who have historically been allowed only to adopt lifestyle, class, and culture of their male counterparts. Their literature before the inception of feminism was too much of an imitation of their male authoritarians; therefore, what they needed most was to express and illustrate what they have really known, felt, and suffered. Hence, in line with feminism women writers start to form a subculture, within the larger framework of a whole society, unified by common values, conventions and experiences, making their way for direct self-expression. (ALTO 159) Showalter believes that such a way of looking at female literary tradition and evolution, that is, tracing the way that women started with an imitation of their male counterparts and the ways through which this subculture or "minority group finds its direction of self-expression relative to a dominant society" is very illuminating. (ALTO 27) This is what a gynocritic does; a gynocritic starts a feminist research in "history, anthropology, psychology and sociology" all of which have developed and supported the premise of a "female subculture including not only the ascribed status, and the internalized constructs of femininity, but also the occupations, interactions and consciousness of women." Showalter believes that without apprehending the framework of female subculture, one would either totally miss or simply misinterpret the themes, motifs and structures of female literature and would finally fail to make necessary connections within a tradition. Giving the example of the motif of female suffering, as one of the key motifs in women's literature, Showalter emphasizes that "the reclamation of suffering is only the beginning, its purpose is to discover the new world." Exemplifying Adrienne Rich whom she calls as "one of the spokeswomen for a new women's writing which explores the will to change" though quoting one of her poems, Showalter notes that many of women's writings, especially in the United States, have gone "reclaiming suffering to its re-

investment" relating "the pain of transformation to history" ("Feminist Poetics" 30-32):

If I'm lonely
it must be the loneliness
of waking first, of breathing
dawn's first cold breath on the city
of being the one awake
in a house wrapped in sleep (*Diving into the Wreck* 20)

Showalter concludes that some women's writings, reclaiming women's sufferings throughout history under a male-governed society, break through and emasculate masculine systems that control them, create their own symbols and imaginatively undergo to build a society of their own in their own literature. ("Feminist Poetics" 28)

This is the main point of focus in Showalter's cultural model of gynocriticism. One of the privileges of looking from the perspective of women's culture, which is the main focus of Showalter's cultural model, is that it shows female tradition as a "positive source of strength and solidarity" which can make its own symbols, a wild zone of experience, as an opposition to male tradition. Thus, in her cultural model Showalter develops the idea of female "wild zone." Believing that women constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by, the dominant (male) group, Showalter portrays the relationship of the dominant male group and the muted through the following diagram developed by Ardener (qtd. in Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 200):

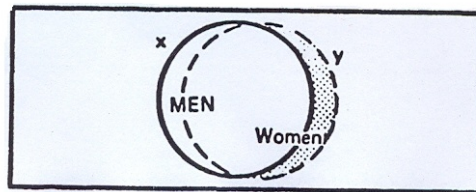


Diagram 1: Showalter's Wild Zone

Showalter calls the Y zone as the "wild zone" since spatially it refers to a place where men are forbidden to enter, a "no-man's-land," and practically it refers to those aspects of women's life style which are intangible for men and never experienced by them. Wild zone or "Female space" is a place which allows a life for the symbolic female consciousness, lets the invisible to become visible, and allows the silent to speak. It is a place for "the revolutionary women's language, the language of everything that is repressed; it is a place for the revolutionary women's writing in 'white ink.'" It is the hiding place where "Cixous's laughing Medusa" lives; it is a place where, through a journey to it female writers can write out of the "cramped confines of patriarchal space" ("Feminist Criticism" 200-204).

The traces of such a wild zone of female experience could be detected in Rich's writing in *A Wild Patience*. Up to the beginning of open rendering of her feminist poetry all that Rich had was "the language of the fathers, her father's language," but from 1970s onwards Rich's poems, instead of her former

subservience to the dominant cultural forms, become "critical challenges to destructive cultural practices and narratives," asking for a female poetic voice. (Templeton 54) Rich condemns women's holding of their secrets and unsaid words; she reproaches "the silences that deny and may even negate a woman's full emergence into a power that would be a beneficent counterforce to male power" (Keyes 134-9).

Rich's poems struggle to resist and modify the cultural narratives that obliterate women's voices trying to create a revolutionary female voice and narrative. Insisting on the revolutionary power of poetry, Rich writes

Any revolutionary art is an alchemy through which waste, greed, brutality, frozen indifference, 'blind sorrow,' and anger are transmuted into some drenching recognition of *What if?* -- the possible. *What if* --? -- the first revolutionary question... the theme of revolutionary art may of necessity be prevailing conditions, yet the art signals other ways and means. (*WIFT* 242)

This "*what if*" is one of the recurring themes of Rich's poetry trying to visualize the ways through which such a world may be transformed. She, exposing the violence of patriarchal order against women, makes poetic revision as an "act of survival" (Landau 141). Vendler, going with this idea, states that Rich's poetry is "a poetry of conversion ... [a search] for power, enough power to destroy ... those structures that had proved so inhuman" (370). For Rich poetry has the power of destroying the cultural narratives that carry on the oppression of women and violence towards them; she asserts that "we need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it, [...] not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (*OLSS* 35). Therefore, in many of her poems in *A Wild Patience* Rich gives priority to female existence as a source of power resisting the masculine violence in a patriarchal society. "Coast to Coast" is one of such poems; the poem starts with depicting women's confinement to the domestic household, picturing it as deadening, as one of the kinds of violence that women put up with: "old servitude in grief and fury bending/ to the accustomed tasks" (*A Wild Patience* 6). But within such violence, Rich brings the metaphor of a prism serving to show the transformative potential of female existence.

Seeing through the prism
You who gave it me
You, bearing ceaselessly
Yourself the witness
Rainbow dissolves the Hudson This chary, stinting
Skin of late winter ice forming and breaking up
The unprotected seeing it thorough
With their ordinary valor

Rainbow composed of ordinary light
February-flat
Grey-white of a cheap enameled pan
Breaking into viridian, azure, violet [...]

Seeing through the prism [...]

Your anger uttered in silence word
 [...] and witness the passion of the speechless
 Driving your speech protectless (*A Wild Patience* 6-7)

The poem, according to Landau "extends the metaphor of the prism to evoke the transformative power of the female body and of revisionary language;" That is as the prism's rainbow transforms the grey light into rainbow, so does the "revolutionary anger and revisionary language [in] clear[ing] the deadening fog of domestic servitude." The connection of females, being a source of power, stands against the domestic violence prevailing patriarchal society. The poem is about the power of revisionary feminist poetics and politics to "'shatter,' 'pierce,' 'carve,' and 'turn' the world into a radically different place" (154). The reflection of such an attitude towards the female in Rich's *A Wild Patience* could be detected through different means and images. In this volume we can recognize Rich's acknowledgment of the existence of the sources of creative power within herself as a writer and within her female literary ancestors who create thoroughly feminine symbols and aesthetics to render their unuttered words.

What Rich does in this period of her literary career is closely related to the major mission of a gynocritic; a gynocentric criticism, Showalter affirms, situates female writers "with respect to the variables of literary culture, such as modes of production," asserting their purely female genius. Specifically, the cultural model of gynocriticism shows how the female tradition, producing its own symbols and experiences, can be a positive source of strength. ("Feminist Criticism" 202-4) Quilting is one of those purely female symbolic forms of literary creation leading them to create a wild zone of female experience. Showalter believes that tracing American literature, we will be able to find a literature of *our* own, "an American poetics of gender" ("Piecing and Writing" 222). Female writers turn to purely female aesthetics such as the tradition of piecing and quilting to create a literature of their own while this art is considered as a useless art by men throughout history preventing women from their only means of self expression.

I stuck my loaded needle
 into the coarse squares of the sack. I smoothed
 the stylized pattern on my knee with pride
 I also heard them say my own designs
 were childlike, primitive, obscene. (*A Wild Patience* 55)

Nevertheless, such metaphors as the "metaphors of text and textile, thread and theme, weaver and web" are the metaphors which belong only to female subculture and through which female writers develop their revolutionary ideas. As Showalter puts it, especially with the beginning of the new wave of feminist art, quilting and embroidery has become one of the primal metaphors for women's lives and culture. Furthermore, the history of piecing and patchwork, she asserts, "is closely associated with the American female experience" and is widely investigated as a model for a female aestheticism serving to represent feminine sensibility and originality. Therefore, the new feminist woman returns to the images and metaphors of piecing as a vehicle of the female tradition operating as a "creative manipulation of convention" and as a symbol standing for the vanished past experience reconfirming and restating women's toils. ("Piecing and Writing" 224-7). This is what could be traced in Rich's writing; the manner in which Rich "interweaves isolated fragments of experience into poetically meaningful wholes

is analogous to the feminine domestic art of piecing or quilting" (Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 31). Rich does so, in her attempt to attain for women a literature of their own, not merely indirectly and through her images but by turning directly to the female tradition of piecing and embroidery which is seen in her *A Wild Patience*, which is known as one of Rich's volumes with a separatist vision. As Showalter notes, "[t]extile imagery, especially imagery associated with quilts... provides the elements... for a new transformative vision" for female writers. (*Sister's Choice* 162)

Thus, Rich's poetry moves towards such a transformative vision, as her poetry gets more mature in *A Wild Patience*. Rich's *A Wild Patience*, advocating a lesbian separatist vision, gives shape to "a language capable of articulating unique experiences of women" (Werner 9) creating a wild zone of female experience. One can see the reflections of the female tradition of piecing and patchwork creating a woman-centered art form, a wild zone of experience, in different poems in *A Wild Patience*. In "Culture and Anarchy," for instance, Rich, along with an image of herself as a radical feminist woman writer who writes feminist essays on women's suppression and "rape" and also such poems as "Snapshots," gives an image of an aged Alabama quilter who serves to symbolize the kind of connection and transformation which Rich believes to be possible for women through revision.

Rainy days at the kitchen table typing,
heaped up letters, a dry moth's
perfectly mosaic wings, pamphlets on rape,
forced sterilization, snapshots in color
of an Alabama woman still quilting in her nineties.
(*A Wild Patience* 10)

Such an image of a woman "still quilting" represents Rich's persistent belief that piecing and patchwork reveals the fusion of women's experiences as a necessary element for her vision of transformation. Quilting, as Showalter puts it, is a way of "rethinking the maternal;" it is a "female art of nurturance and sisterhood" ("Piecing and Writing" 225-6). The poem bringing about such a transformation and bondage actualizing the long-run dream of a no-man's land, ends with a celebration of a woman-centered vision taken from Elizabeth Cady Stanton's letter to Susan B. Anthony: "Yes, our work is one./ we are one in aim and sympathy/ and we should be together" (*A Wild Patience* 15).

Therefore, Rich tries to attain some sort of aesthetic independence in *A Wild Patience*. She believes that women must return to what has been lost in women's history, "the lost collection;" maybe that is why she returns to women's culture in this collection of her poetry. Rich's poems during this period display such calling back for women's "self-creation." Now women must start anew; thus, the "we" of these poems, Langdell observes, turn to silence until they are totally purified of their former formulas and orations. Rich leaves such formulas in her new poetry and instead her new language squeezes out of the former imprisoning codes and formulas which kept her and other women passive. The result of such changes in her poetic voice is the creation of a vision which appears in her new poetry. Here she leaves the male jargon and turns to female aesthetics trying to piece together "the scraps, bits of yarn, calico, and velvet" creating a genuinely female piece of art. In this manner, by nurturing women's native creativity, particularly traditional

female arts and crafts, Rich starts an original act of creation. The female creator in these poems creates noncompetitively without any concern for mastery; this is the "new feminist artist," the quiet creator of the "subversive quilt," whose only concern is discovering and pleasing herself with her aesthetic creation. In this art of weaving women find their own valuable art forms and "an awareness of the constant tradition of women's arts and the female tradition in literature" (152-3). It is through such traditions that Rich goes back to the wild zone of female experience, a no-man's land never recognized by the male critic, creating a purely female aesthetic form reflecting female concerns.

"Turning the Wheel" one of the other poems in *A Wild Patience* which represents another of such images of women's art:

In Colcha embroidery, I learn,
women use raveled yarn from old wool blankets
to trace out scenes on homespun woolen sacks-
our ancient art of making out of nothing-
or is it making the old life serve the new? (*A Wild Patience* 55)

This is women's ancient skill in creating something invaluable out of what others considered valueless. In *A Wild Patience*, Keyes asserts, Rich is ready even to sacrifice all her life and art for "the feminine principle [and...] womanly power;" therefore, in "Turning the Wheel," she turns to "the female core" (201). Showalter notes that "in literary theories of Female Aesthetic, the metaphor of piecing has been used as a model for the organization of language in the wild zone of the woman's text" ("Piecing and Writing" 226). Therefore, through holistically female aesthetics and sources of experience such as quilting which is not experienced by men, Rich creates a wild zone of female experience letting her to articulate her long-run silence making the invisible visible.

Hence, for turning to purely female tradition for presentation of women's experiences, Rich in this poem first starts with retelling historical misrepresentation of women through patriarchal media. She believes that the images of women delivered through history by the medium of "textbooks, museum labels and cultural myths" are false images. That is why she asserts that women must be interpreters, participants and practitioners of their history and myth not merely detached observers who fail to claim their rights. Therefore, in *A Wild Patience* Rich claims authority for women, a process which involves acceptance of "incompleteness of our historical circumstance." Such a process is evidently traceable in "Turning the Wheel;" in section three of "Turning the Wheel," entitled as "Hohokam," which is named after a prehistoric tribe which mysteriously disappeared from the desert, Rich criticizes the label of the museum of Hohokam as "those who have ceased to be" since it indirectly dismisses the existence of such a tribe, as female myth and aesthetic is totally dismissed, rather than "imagin[ing] its reality." Templeton notes that Rich is referring to the fact that history has "banished the Indian woman's ghost and irrevocably erased the traces of her historical reality." Thus, subversive to such an attitude, Rich re-imagines an image of a woman "bringing water to fields of [...] cotton," serving as a metaphor for women's return to their female aesthetics, the art of embroidery. (99-107) Therefore, having recounted the elimination of women's myth and tradition from the face of history, Rich calls for a return to women's real tradition.

I try to pierce through to a prehistoric culture

the museum says were known as *those who have ceased*.

I try to imagine them [...]

those who have ceased is amnesia language:

no more to be said of them. Nobody wants

to see their faces or hear what they were about.

I try to imagine a desert-shamaness

bringing water to fields of [...] cotton. (*A Wild Patience* 54)

Hence, in *A Wild Patience* Rich continues her efforts to recollect women's real history and myth. In this volume she tries to "demystify false images of the past and false representations of women's lives," which was brought about by the male agents, and posits female ideals as more valid than the patriarchal ideologies by displacing female myths which are prototypical rather than archetypal, that is, a repetitious form of meaning recurring across cultures and throughout history. A criticism of the nature of the male myth is done in this period of Rich's literary career by turning directly to purely female form of myth. Rich, thus, in *A Wild Patience* brings to the fore the lost facts of women's history and myth making a "self-made, provisional framework" (Templeton 93).

Hence, Rich's focus on the female is now inspired by "mythmaking." Such an attitude of Rich's in *A Wild Patience* could be traced in the sixth section of "Turning the Wheel" in which Rich, having discovered the effects of colonization on the land she journeys to in this poem, turns to a goddess, a shamaness, who as a female artist "sits offering her treasures by the road" (Keyes 198). Rich here gives such a vision of a goddess trying to focus on how "Unborn sisters" will see Rich, and female writers like her, developing the new female tradition. The poem envisions the goddess' emergence, which she sees only in her dreams, with rings and "on her large fingers jasper and sardonyx and agate smolder." Conjecturing her appearance with "shawls woven in fire and blood," Rich asks us to acknowledge her and be brave enough to look at her in the eye and tell the unborn girls how she looks like to make her recognizable for them as well since she is the ancient goddess, the Great Earth Mother, the essence of the female which dwells in every woman. In other words, truthfully conceiving the shamaness, Rich "revises and revitalizes" historical and mythological concepts. (Langdell 153-4)

If she appears, hands ringed with rings

you have dreamed about, if on her fingers

jasper and sardonyx and agate smolder

if she is wearing shawls woven in fire

and blood, [...]

if she sits offering her treasure by the road

to spare a brother's or an uncle's dignity

or if she sits pretending

to weave or grind or do some other thing

for the appeasement of the ignorant [...]

look at her closely if you dare (*A Wild Patience* 57)

"Turning the Wheel" displays Rich's passionate belief in the value of women's lives and art and the everlasting mystery of the female principle. In this poem Rich, focusing on the feminine mythic energy especially in sections with even numbers, turns to "emblems of mythic feminine power" as it existed in American Southwest: the burden baskets of the "young woman's puberty dances,"

the Colcha embroidery representing "our ancient art of making out of nothing," an "apparition" of the female power, and the Grand Canyon as "the female core/ of a continent" in sections two, four, six and eight respectively. These emblems of feminine power, all put together, promise the development of a woman-centered vision in Rich's poetry. (Werner 156)

Though in her opening poem, "The Images," in *A Wild Patience* she asserts that "no-man's land does not exist," it seems that through the art of quilting and also through reference to different mythic symbols of female power along with the call on such images as the "shamaness," as a female artist who "sits offering her treasures by the road," Rich is trying to actualize the impossible no-man's land, a female wild zone of experience, advancing her poetic journey. (Keyes 198) Rich's doubt and uncertainty about the possibility of creating a no-man's land now turns to certainty with her concentration on a woman-centered alternative to patriarchy, her public advocacy of a lesbian separatist vision, and her attempt to create an art form capable of articulating the unique experiences of women in *A Wild Patience*. Rich insists, women are in the process of creating a new future, a future in which women are "powerful, full of our own power, not the old patriarchal power-over but the power-to-create, power-to-think, power-to-articulate and concretize our visions and transform our lives and those of our children" (*OLSS* 271-2).

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