

**THE PROTEST FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN THE ESSAY
"COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY AND LESBIAN EXISTENCE"
BY ADRIENNE RICH**

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Abstract

It is often argued that all literature is protest; the expression of an opinion, an objection that triggers a change in its readers and social institutions. Essays, in particular, have evolved as protests on both personal and political levels. This paper aims to examine one such essay that constituted an important part of the radical feminist movement of the 60s, 70s, and 80s. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" by Adrienne Rich is a text that urges women to see the truth underlying the normalcy of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is a political institution and a product of the patriarchal setup that renders the "male right of physical, economic and emotional access" to women as natural and normal. In doing so, it leaves women with no option to choose otherwise. Rich challenges the erasure of lesbian existence from scholarly feminist writings and argues that such erasures are not just anti-lesbian but also anti-feminist, as they mislead and manipulate the experiences of heterosexual women. She urges women to look beyond heterosexuality by experiencing lesbianism to truly understand what they want. This paper evaluates lesbianism as an extension of feminism and traces the importance of such powerful writing in the wake of Women's Liberation Movement.

Keywords: Protest, Radical feminism, Lesbian Existence, Heterosexuality, Women's Liberation Movement

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"When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent we are still afraid. So, it is better to speak." – Audre Lorde

"Your silence will not protect you." – Audre Lorde

Words are a powerful and potent force that we behold. History shows us that when used wisely, words have the power to construct and unite even the most diverse sections of the society and literature uses the same power as its medium. Literature doesn't just mirror the society and express its joys, fears and discontents but plays a much greater role. Richard Wright once said, "all literature is protest" (Baldwin) and many would agree that in being so it acts as an instrument for change.

Protest literature doesn't remain confined to words but rather exceeds to direct a change in the established order. Adrienne Rich, a poet, an essayist and a radical feminist who brought "the oppression of women and lesbians to the forefront of poetic discourse" (Flood) believed in the power of literature to trigger change and used it to influence many women in the wake of Women's Liberation Movement. Rich was vigorously involved in social activities and knew that literature had a crucial role to play in politics. She saw that by distorting it to their own benefit, literature had been used as a tool by the oppressors, but, now the oppressed could use literature as their own tool to fight back. In the acceptance speech to the National Book Foundation in 2006, on receiving its medal for distinguished contribution to American letters, she said, "Poetry is not a healing lotion, an emotional massage, a kind of linguistic aromatherapy" (qtd. in Fox). She saw poetry and other literary genres "as a keen-edged beacon by which women's lives- women's consciousness- could be illuminated" (Fox).

“Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” is a 1980 essay that became a part of the radical feminist movement of the 60s, 70s and 80s. The purpose of this work, as stated by Rich, was to inspire women to think about their right to choose. Through this work, Rich challenges and questions the matter of lesbian erasure and the construction of heterosexual institution. To begin with, most feminists would show disinterest in the matter of lesbian invisibility. As Rich points out, even the most scholarly feminist works have turned a blind eye to the matter. Although, a closer evaluation reveals that lesbian erasure is both anti-lesbian and anti-feminist. By eliminating and distorting the documents of lesbian existence, women have been denied a rich knowledge of their history. They have been made to believe that heterosexuality is normal and the only way in which a regular society functions. Rich argues that heterosexuality is a political institution and a product of a patriarchal setup that renders the male right of physical, economic and emotional access to women as normal and natural. In doing so, women are treated as subordinate to men and are stripped of their right to choose. The same political institution also pushes lesbians in the shadows compelling many women to either hide or live a double life. This work, in a way, sketched a “bridge over the gap between *lesbian* and *feminist*” (Rich, “Compulsory”, 11) uniting them in the cause for Women’s Liberation. Rich says:

Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, and how we can begin to see- and therefore live- afresh. (“When We Dead Awaken”, 18)

“Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us”, says the feminist scholar Judith Fetterley, “and to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects. To expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature is to make our system of power embodied in literature open not only to discussion but even to change” (Fetterley). This is synonymous to what Rich asks women to do; to be conscious and aware of the constructed reality to bring about the desired change. She asks women to not fall prey to the assumption of

heterosexuality as normal and to question the restrictions it imposes. More importantly, she urges feminists not to “read, write, or teach from a perspective of unexamined heterocentricity”(Rich, “Compulsory”, 11).

The initial concern of Rich’s work is “how and why women’s choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community” has been crushed. The bias of compulsory heterosexuality has forced them to hide and disguise rendering them invisible due to the fear of being deviant and hence, abhorred. The Black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde, writes:

Traditionally, in american society, it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor. For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as american as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection. (630)

The subject of lesbian existence as a reality remains ignored due to the same fears. Rich discusses four feminist books written from different viewpoints to show that even the works that concern themselves with “mothering, sex roles, relationships and societal prescriptions for women” do not indulge in examining the institution of heterosexuality which affects these roles. In the work *Children and Work in the Lives of Women*, Alice Rossi states that biologically women have two innate orientations- sexual orientation towards men and reproductive orientation towards their young ones. The concept of preference, here, and in most other works is never questioned and it is presumed that women are innately heterosexual. Another assumption that Rich mentions is related to lesbians. The character Anna, in Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, mentions that a lesbian is just a woman acting out of her bitterness towards men. These assumptions are not personal in any case but are widely circulated in literature and in social sciences without being reviewed. They are obstacles in emancipating women as they catalogue lesbianism under disease and consider heterosexuality as an intrinsic preference which then becomes imposed and maintained by force.

We have carelessly given rein to the assumption of heterosexuality as the most desired preference of women. If it were so, why is it that we come across situations in almost every culture where women feel trapped in unpleasurable relationships and even

resist marriages at certain occasions, although, not all women enjoy the financial independence to do so. Rich poses the same question to her readers encouraging them to understand why many women feel impoverished, drained and filled with pain in heterosexual relationships. *The Reproduction of Mothering*, a text by Nancy Chodorov, offers a psychoanalytic perspective by stating that men are “emotionally secondary” in women’s lives. Chodorov says, “women have a richer, ongoing inner world to fall back on... men do not become as emotionally important to women as women do to men”. Rich aligns this thought to the twentieth century findings of Smith-Rosenberg about eighteenth and nineteenth century women’s emotional focus on women. Here, when we say that women are “emotionally important” to women, it includes the emotions of both anger and love or even the intense combination of both which is often found in women’s relationship with women. In her work, Chodorov argues that women want children because their heterosexual relationships lack richness and intensity and by having children women attempt to re-create their own intense relationship with their mothers. Rich comments:

It seems to me that on the basis of her own findings, Chodorov leads us implicitly to conclude that heterosexuality is not a “preference” for women, that, for one thing, it fragments the erotic from the emotional in a way that women find impoverishing and painful. Yet her book participates in mandating it. Neglecting the covert socializations and the overt forces which have channeled women into marriage and heterosexual romance, pressures ranging from the selling of daughters to the silences of literature to the images of the television screen, she... is stuck with trying to reform a manmade institution—compulsory heterosexuality—as if, despite profound emotional impulses and complementarities drawing women toward women, there is a mystical/biological heterosexual inclination, a “preference” or “choice” which draws women toward men. (“Compulsory”, 16-17)

Jonathan Katz’s work *Gay American History* mentions an incident from 1656 when the New Haven Colony had prescribed a death penalty for lesbians. In the name of treatment, lesbians were tortured and documents about the same have been retrieved in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The historian Nancy Sahli documents the breakdown of female friendships among college women of the twentieth century. Her work *For Her Own Good* seems to be a reference to “the economic imperative to heterosexuality and marriage and to the sanctions imposed against single women and widows—both of whom have been and still are viewed as

deviant”(Rich, “Compulsory”, 14). Yet, it is strange that even in a Marxistfeminist study of male prescriptions for female sanity and health, the political prescription of heterosexuality goes unexamined.

Rich forms a framework, based on eight characteristics of male power in archaic and contemporary societies- laid down by Kathleen Gough in *The Origin of Family*, to perceive how heterosexuality has been enforced. The power of men to deny women their own sexuality is the first characteristic. Women are shunned from comfortably exploring their bodies and are made to believe the myth of vaginal orgasm which suggests that only a man can satisfy a woman. This myth along with the horrid procedures of clitoridectomy and infibulation in certain communities, prevent women from having relations with other women. Another way of exerting power is by forcing male sexuality upon them through:

rape (including marital rape) and wife beating; father-daughter, brother-sister incest; the socialization of women to feel that male sexual “drive” amounts to a right; idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, the media, advertising, etc.; child marriage; arranged marriage; prostitution; the harem; psychoanalytic doctrines of frigidity and vaginal orgasm; pornographic depictions of women responding pleasurably to sexual violence and humiliation. (“Compulsory”, 18)

Other characteristics of male power include commanding or exploiting their labor to control their produce, robbing them of their children, confining them physically, using them as objects in male transactions, cramping their creativeness and withholding from them large areas of the society’s knowledge and cultural attainments. These methods through which male power is maintained ranges from controlling the physical as well as the psychological realm of a woman.

Throughout history, women in every culture have undertaken the task of leading independent, non-heterosexual lives where women-connections have been primary. But this has often happened under the belief that they were the only females to have done so. And yet, they went against the social organization “even though attacks against unmarried women have ranged from aspersion and mockery to deliberate gynocide, including the burning and torturing of millions of widows and spinsters during the witch persecutions of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries in Europe” Rich, “Compulsory”, 15. Kathleen Barry, in the work *Female Sexual Slavery*, says that the primary relations of a young girl are with her girl-friends but

when she becomes aware of her increasing sexuality she turns away from them to seek the attention of boys to form a secondary relation. Rich argues with this notion; while some women never turn away from their primary relations even for a temporary period, something makes other women- lesbians hide for their entire life. "A fear of lesbians, or of being accused of being a lesbian, has led many black women into testifying against themselves. It has led some of us into destructive alliances, and others into despair and isolation." (634), says Audre Lorde. This fear of being accused or discovered as a lesbian comes from the fear of being tagged as unworthy of male attention and support which remains important to women who are not independent financially. Rich acknowledges this problem while discussing the characteristics of male power in the society.

After posing questions on social organization and assumptions, Rich goes ahead to give us the term "lesbian continuum" as opposed to lesbianism which has a limited and clinical ring. The term lesbian continuum, as she suggests, includes a range encompassing each woman's life throughout history. It covers women-identified experiences which are not just limited to consciously desired sexual experiences. The term expands to include many forms of relationships and bonds that women share with each other like sharing an inner life, bonding against male tyranny along with giving and receiving practical and political support. Lesbian existence is a rejection of the compulsory life imposed on women and a step towards breaking of a taboo. It is an attack on the male access to women and we may perceive it as a mode of resistance which is a major theme in Rich's essay. In the last section of her essay, Rich says:

Woman identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality. The denial of reality and invisibility to women's passion for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other.....The lie keeps numberless women psychologically trapped, trying to fit mind, spirit, and sexuality into a prescribed script because they cannot look beyond the parameters of the acceptable. It pulls on the energy of such women even as it drains the energy of "closeted" lesbians—the energy exhausted in the double life. The lesbian trapped in the "closet," the woman imprisoned in prescriptive ideas of the "normal"

share the pain of blocked options, broken connections, lost access to self-definition freely and powerfully assumed. 34-35

Women's Liberation Movement was a collective struggle for equality and it consisted of diverse individuals and groups who held differing beliefs. Rich was aware of this fragmentation in the community of women and knew well that it would be a hinderance in their collective fight against patriarchal setup. Her words urged women to stick together in the fight against male supremacy; to recognize their differences but also to understand what led to the crackdown in women's bonds with other women. In the essay *Age, Race, Class, and Sex*, Audre Lorde redefines the way we look at our differences:

It is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation. For we have been raised in a society where those distortions were endemic within our living. Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections. Either way, we do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change. 631

It has been falsely understood that unity lies in being a homogenous group. *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* strongly insists that women should shed the pretense of heterosexual homogeneity which has worked in the favor of maintaining male dominance in the society. Rich urges women to see for themselves what it is that they prefer rather than accepting the prescriptions laid down by the power holders. Refusing to recognize the existence of lesbians makes it problematic and impossible for us to see the pitfalls that we face as a community of women.

In a later essay, *Reflections on Compulsory Heterosexuality*- which was written after Rich was accused of starting a lesbian revolution against heterosexuality, she says:

I was writing an exploratory piece, an essay in the literal sense of "attempt": a turning the picture—the presumption of female heterosexuality—around to view it from different angles, a hazarding of unasked questions. That it should be read as a manifesto or doctrine never occurred to me. When it began to be reprinted as a pamphlet by small lesbian-feminist presses here and abroad, I was agreeably

surprised. When I began to hear that it was being claimed by some separatist lesbians as an argument against heterosexual intercourse altogether, I began to feel acutely and disturbingly the distance between speculative intellectual searching and the need for absolutes in the politics of lesbian feminism... There had never been a monolithic, unitary women's movement... In framing a "lesbian continuum" I was trying—somewhat clumsily—to address the disconnect between heterosexually-identified and lesbian feminists.

As she claims, Adrienne Rich never meant to start a lesbian revolt against the practice of heterosexuality. Her efforts were inclined towards raising awareness among women about making their own choice. *Compulsory Heterosexuality* was written with a goal to unite women, in a time that demanded the strength of women's power more than ever, by a woman who lived by what she said and wrote. In 1974, on the occasion of National Book Award ceremony, she made the statement:

We, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich and Alice Walker, together accept this award in the name of all women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world... we believe that we can enrich ourselves more in supporting and giving to each other than by competing against each other.

Although, known as a poet of towering rage who used powerful words, when talking about the goal of their struggle in her 1984 speech, Rich simply said that she and her sisters were fighting for "the creation of a society without domination." The creation of such a society calls for change which as Lorde says is growth and growth can often be painful, "but we sharpen self- definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those with whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals. For Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike, this can mean new paths to our survival." (636)

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