

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology  
of Egypt / Egyptology

## ADROGYNIST POETICS: A JOURNEY BEYOND GENDER

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**Shivani Suri Verma , Adrogynist Poetics: A Journey Beyond Gender , Palarch's  
Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 17(15), 83-88. ISSN 1567-214x.**

**Key Words Androgyny, Wemyn, Female Aesthetic, Patriarchy, Other, Androgynist  
Poetics, Harmony, Foundation, Creativity, Transformation, Struggle, Wholeness,  
Beyond Gender.**

### Abstract

Adrogyny was for Virginia Woolf, a way for liberating women from the negativism of patriarchy. It was a kind of parable containing a solution to the dilemma of the feminist at war with herself. Like Woolf, Adrienne charts new territory for contemporary wemyn by asserting her purpose for writing directly and overtly as a womyn, out of a womyn's body and experience. Attempting to recover the lost history of wemyn, she examines the mythic and anthropological prehistory of motherhood in Western culture, the modern domination of the birth process by male physicians, the psychological roots of "matrophobia," and the mother-daughter bond. It locates the figure of mother as an important object of exploration in relation to the birth of the feminist daughter. Rich insists on the need to transform all relationships in an effort to create an egalitarian society that would be free from any kind of domination, violence, and polarization. She endorses radical concept of wemyn-centered vision, whose goal is not equality but utter transformation.

### Adrogynist Poetics: A Journey Beyond Gender

"One is not born a woman

But rather becomes one."

(Simone de Beauvoir," The Second Sex)

The relationship between sex and gender has raised many alarming questions. Twenty first century feminists argued that sex, the biological distinction between male and female did not determine gender differences, and that masculinity and femininity were socially constructed. The women's movement in late twentieth century initiated feminist critique of male culture

and female aesthetic celebrating women's culture that led to a new phase of gynocriticism. Gynesis dealt with "The Feminine" in philosophy, language and psychoanalysis and became a significant influence for Androgynist Poetics.

Androgyny is a term derived from the Greek words (andras, meaning man and gyne, meaning woman) that can refer to two concepts regarding the mixing of both male and female genders or having a lack of gender identification. In other words, an androgyne is a person who does not fit cleanly into the typical masculine and feminine gender roles of society. Many androgynies identify as being mentally between male and female, as entirely genderless or beyond genders and refer to themselves using gender-neutral pronouns. Physical androgyny, psychological androgyny, and spiritual androgyny constitute three stages of androgyny. Physical androgyny defines a human being with male/female characteristics. Spiritual androgyny reflects the principle of half man and half woman trapped in one body. Psychological androgyny means a person fully integrated with nature, God's creation to rise beyond the sex roles to a much broader concept of a whole human being.

According to the "Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia", the Dogon African tribe has a myth of creation that believes that androgyny is a sign of perfection. Whereas, according to Indian myth, lord Shiva is often depicted as half man and woman "Ardhnarishwar." But the rejection of androgyny in Judeo-Christian tradition shows that they have no understanding about the fact that Adam too was an androgyne, whose body was made up of nine attributes such as, intelligence, wisdom, knowledge, love, beauty, justice, foundation, power, and strength, and created Eve out of his body, so that they together complete the purpose of creation. Heilbrun Carolyn defines androgyny as "a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes and the human impulses expressed by man and woman are not rigidly assigned...androgyny suggest a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes; it suggest, further, a full range of experience open to individuals who may, as women, be aggressive, as men ,be tender."(X)

June Singer, in her book "Androgyny: The Opposites Within" defines androgyny by explaining the implications of psychological androgyny as: "The androgyny approaches the problems by seeing that true change begins primarily within the psychic structure of the individual...those of the androgyny are mainly intrapsychic. They consciously accept the interplay of the masculine and feminine aspects of the individual psyche." (15) She says that most people being devoid of spiritual understanding perceive male and female in a literal sense that prevents them from seeing the spiritual reality of androgyny. Hence it is quiet apparent that to mature, male and female have to develop attributes of the opposite sex by becoming androgynous psychologically, so that they can achieve the spiritual component of androgyny in order to have eternal life.

Virginia Woolf is the first feminist critic to debate the concept of the androgynous mind in "A Room of One's Own" (1929). For her androgynous was the theory that aimed to offer men and women a chance to write without being conscious of their sex, the effect of which would ideally result in an uninhabited creativity. The liberal milieu of Bloomsbury group clearly influenced Woolf's concept of the androgynous mind because of the belief that to be artistic one must have the unique combination of masculine and feminine elements found in hermaphrodites and homosexuals. Despite its problematic origins androgyny was for Woolf and many feminist critics, a way of liberating women from the negativism of patriarchy. In fact, Woolf's novels are a kind of record of this search for wholeness; this elusive unity of being, where she had no single name for the ideal condition she sought, but at times called it the androgynous mind. She refers to the mind, as luminous, in which masculine and feminine elements unite in perfect harmony: "There are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body...And in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates over the man. The

normal comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating...Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine.” (170-171) For Virginia Woolf, androgyny was a kind of parable containing a solution to the dilemma of the feminist at war with herself. It is a way to reconcile the warring opposites, sought equality between the sexes, keep balance between the two halves for social regeneration, sought inner harmony and last but not the least lead to renewal of the individual.

Most feminist critics insist that the way to contend with patriarchal bias against women is not to deny sexual difference but to dismantle gender hierarchies, not sexual difference itself, but rather its meaning within patriarchal ideology---“division, oppression, inequality, interiorized inferiority for women”—must be attacked. Helen Haste in her thought provoking essay, “The Sexual Metaphor” (1993), analyzes the social construction of gender. She defines the aim of ‘socialist feminism’ as a kind of ‘rational androgyny’ – to which all, regardless of sex, can aspire. She argues that dualistic thought is only capable of a single perspective since it cast one side of each dichotomy as ‘ideal’ and it is opposite as ‘other’. Therefore, social feminists try to transfer the perceived polarities, differences and conflicts between female and male into the entire world and everything in it. Adrienne Rich, one such social feminist, and a poet develops a female aesthetics, shaped by the power-to-transform women. In effect to create “a new kind of human being,” who is outside the traditions shaped by patriarchy, she continually defines and redefines the concept of power and rejects power-as-force for the power-as-transform, which is an essential and significant power. She always believed in “Posse, Potere, Pouvoir” –to be able, to have the potential, to possess and use one’s energy of creation as transforming power, and has cut herself off from “formal, overt power” and found an alternative in the concept of Psychological androgyny, where an individual is a balanced human with masculine and feminine traits.

As a poet and theorist Adrienne Rich, has become one of the most eloquent, provocative voices on the politics of sexuality, race, language, power, and women’s culture. Rich was strongly inspired by Karl Mark’s term “Feminine Ferment” that constitutes a key aspect in signifying women’s crucial role in the transformation of society. She shared with Karl Mark and Elizabeth Janeway, a concern over women’s position in patriarchy and dynamics of change that focus upon their social position on power as a process rather than a quality. Simone de Beauvoir’s landmark study “The Second Sex” (1949) depicts how the division between man and woman becomes division of different kinds of power. She said that woman will remain in her position as the “Other” until she, like man, learns her power. With the same vein of feminist thought Adrienne Rich too, tried to locate herself by developing a female aesthetic shaped by the power to transform that gradually coincides with the goals of the women’s movement. “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963) and Necessities of Life (1966) are the finest examples of her leadership role in the woman’s movement.

It was with her third volume, “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” that she matures as a feminist poet. It represents “transitional” phase in which she takes on a male persona in many of her poems. Albert Gelpi justifies this male identification by applying a Jungian interpretation, saying that “the poet is at point imagining herself in terms of her “animus”, the archetypal ‘masculine’ component in the woman’s psyche.” (137) A closer look at the title poem and other key poems in this volume, depict, the developing radical sense in Rich of the self, which points beyond the “androgynous wholeness” of Jungian psychology towards a feminist vision where the self is not locked into gender-specific roles. in her treatment of identity and costumes of self that is reminiscent of “Orlando” by Virginia Woolf. As literary women both challenge the “fixity” of gender in their respective works.

Rich’s poetry such as, Leaflets (1969) and The Will to Change (1971) clearly record her personal and political journeys with intense power. In her volume “Leaflets”, Rich aims

at creating public forms that are capable of meeting private needs and rejects traditional masculine aesthetics that arbitrarily separates art and life. It also depicts the aim of the poem at creating a gynocentric universe. One of the most important poems of this volume, "Orion" is an animus poem that aims at projecting poet's sense of power, an awareness of the male principle within herself. Whereas, the other poem "The Abnegation" projects the evolution of Rich's personal, aesthetic and political values-significant tendency towards the female principle in much wider scope.

Adrienne Rich reconciles from the overemphasis upon intellect in poetry, including her own work because it meant an adherence to the male principle as the source of consciousness. She turned to the-instinctual in the human psyche – or the female principles to discover the power of women in her language. She identified herself as a radical feminist and a lesbian separatist by the dawn of '70s that was strongly visible in "Diving into the Wreck", (1974) an explicitly feminist volume of poems. Her effort to achieve a new understanding of her personal and political needs is perhaps best expressed in this National Book Award winner volume. Her poetry represents an effort to express a shift of world that might be translated into a change of language and belief and this where art and politics meet. The tile poem "Diving into the Wreck", a narrative poem is an allegorical journey of the diver, who in an effort to understand her personal history more fully, decides to return to her primal origin, to plunge into the depths of her psychic and cultural past. In the depth of the sea, the origin of life, Rich explores the wreck of ship, a multivalent metaphor for the remnants of western culture and the re-visioning of the poets past and her subconscious life. Since Rich's most of the speakers are women, so we could assume that Rich's persona is female, but in the present poem Rich handles the speaker in a way that it does not classify any sex categorization.

While writing the poem, she reconstructs a womyn figure in her mind, which rejects a gendering identity and arrives at the end of the poem to a more acceptable sense of subjectivity, one of that can extend and include the community of wemyn. Hence, the poem makes a notion of self-consciousness through the ides of androgyny, the motif of the sea, and enacts its transformative process linguistically. The declarative sentences of the first stanza resolutely describe the preparations for the dive. The diver goes down into the water and experiences the power that comes from diving deep into the sea, "First the air is blue and then / it is bluer and then green and then/ black i am blacking out and yet/ my mask is powerful/ it pumps my blood with power." (163) Rich constantly defines masculinity as the power that helped her diver to reach to the depth of the sea. The dive into the sea-womb signified feminine element, "the sea is another story/ the sea is not a question of power/ I have to learn alone/ to turn my body without force in the deep element."(163) Thus, instead of traditional stories of male heroes, the poet creates a new kind of myth not predicted on power-over the "terrible mother", but entering blissfully into the eternal feminine as into the womb of a mother.

The metaphor of sea has a great significance, for it means the origin of life, the mother's womb. The way the infant lies in the amniotic sack of her mother's womb for nine months and then when it bursts, the baby enters the world, unaware of gendered fixidity. Likewise, the diver wants to go into the laps of "Mother Sea" to know - "Herstory." By arriving at the wreck (psychic and cultural origins) the diver experiences the primal wholeness that predates the dualities, distinctions, and divisions of the Western male stream culture: "This is the place/And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair streams black/ the merman in his armoured body/we circle silently about the wreck/.....I am she: I am he/ ...we are the half - destroyed instruments/ that once held to a course/ the water-eaten log/ the fouled compass."(164) Here the stress of subject and object, mind and matter, male and female are dissolved; the poet discovers the primordial centre of sea "where the spirit began". In the Judeo-Christian myth, there is a divided world where light is separated from darkness, earth

from water, the creatures of the air, land, and sea from one another- a world in which mind is divorced from body, spirit from matter, self from society. At this centre, there are no divisions between subconscious and conscious, subject and object, sacred and profane, inside and outside, god and evil, or feminine and masculine. Thus, "And I am here/ the mermaid../ the merman," the male and female creatures are read as composite one being "I".

This poem is addressed to all humans and does not assume that only females are capable of rebirth and transformation into androgynies. On diving deep into the sea, the diver finds that both male and female are "half-destroyed" because a man who is half-destroyed has denied the woman in him and a woman, the man in her. Here S/he is the cargo itself. The half-destroyed instruments that cannot function properly for it has been crushed under the pseudo sexual differences. S/he is the water-eaten log/ the fouled compass, metaphor used to signify the wreck of the human as a whole being. The wreck too symbolically signifies the failure of human race because they have allowed the myth of sexual differentiation to control them. At the end of the poem, the diver maintains the solitary quality of the psychic adventure, and the poet uses the grammatically awkward "one" to emphasize that each of us must complete the journey alone. As individuals, we contain both masculine and feminine and it is only through its harmonious balance that we can attain completeness of body and mind. She refers to "Book of myths" at the close of the poem, which her diver consulted at the start of the venture, she finds that in it "Our names do not appear" which means those strong women with masculine psyche do not appear in the myths, and they have no reality because if we were male-female, female-male, then the pure "masculinity" and "femininity" is a myth and not the truth. However, in the poem "The Stranger", she focuses on the connection between language and androgyny but finds no word to fit her present state of being-- for androgyne is a "lost noun" and "verb surviving" only in infinitive that was once fit to describe herself as a whole, "I am the androgyne/ I am the living mind you fail to describe/ in your dead language/ the lost noun, the verb in the infinitive/ letters of my name are written under the lids of the newborn child." (65) Nevertheless, she places her hope for the wholeness in the future and in "the newborn child." She says that in the coming future people would come out of these biased sex roles and would rather grow as a whole being. They will be like a new born child then who would know no definition of masculinity and femininity.

Adrienne Rich's poetry serves a prophetic function by articulating the history and ideals of the feminist struggle. Like Virginia Woolf, she finds that masculine ideologies create masculine subjectivity: they are neither objective, nor value-free, nor inclusively "human." So being a womanist, she tries to resolve this conflict between power and powerlessness by recalling the ancient chthonic mysteries of blood and birth, by reconnecting daughters with their mothers, by drawing parallels between today's women and their historical counterparts. She defines feminism as a pluralistic ethos that cuts across divisions of race, caste, gender, and nationality, very much in a manner of Alice Walker's "Womanism": "If we conceive of feminism....as an ethics/ a methodology, a more complex way of thinking about/ thus more responsibly acting upon/the condition of human life, we need a self-knowledge/ which can only develop through/ a steady, passionate attention to all female, experience/I cannot imagine a feminist evolution/ leading to radical change in the private/political realm of gender that is not rooted/ in the conviction that all women's lives are important;/ that lives of men cannot be understood/ by burying the lives of women."(Martin, 227-228) Like Alice Walker and AudreLorde she made an effort by her poetics to enlighten women about their status as "Other" in society, and aroused anger and courage in them to resist subjectivity of the Stereotyped Society. As a radical feminist, she insists on the need to transform all relationships in an effort to create an egalitarian and human society that would be free from any kind of domination, violence, and chauvinism.

She endorses radical concept of wemyn-centred vision, whose goal is not ‘Equality but Utter Transformation.’

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