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Adrienne Rich and Women's Confinement

In perhaps her most famous essay, Adrienne Rich details the many methods of mankind which grow women into complacent, heterosexually sexless wives. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," by Rich, refers to denied and forced sexuality, physical restraint, and objectification as a "cluster of forces" that convince women to desire marriage and a husband even when they find it unsatisfactory (Rich 11). The theme of an unhappy or forced marriage is pervasive within Rich's poetry. In "Contradictions: Tracking Adrienne Rich's Poetry," author Alice Templeton makes an inseparable connection between Rich's poetic undertakings and her strive toward political change (Templeton 334). Insinuating that the meaning of Rich's writing is to inspire change and correct oppressive ideologies. Particularly the legislature that favors the subservience of womankind. Rich's poems "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law," "Living in Sin," and "From a Survivor" break the mold of the happy and willing American housewife by unveiling the truth behind the imposed male fantasy and the women subjugated to heterosexual and domestic confinement.

Rich is well known for her political activism and authenticity, which she expressed through her poems and controversial essays. Rich accredited her radicalization to motherhood (Millier 242). She married a man named Alfred Haskell Conrad in 1953, against the advice of her parents. After giving birth to her children, her poetry and essays became increasingly politicized and feminist in nature. The all-too-common theme of an unsatisfied housewife

seemed to stem from the life she was living with her husband. Rich and Conrad separated in 1970 before she began a relationship with a woman named Michelle Cliff and started to openly identify as a lesbian (Millier 242). Rich's poem, "From a Survivor," which was published after Conrad committed suicide in 1970, is one of her more personal works. In it lies the life story of a lesbian freed from her unfulfilling heterosexual marriage. Before the era of "From a Survivor," was the yearning, grappling, internal struggle of a protagonist trapped in unhappy, brain-rotting monotony, with the question of whether she could wake up.

In "Adrienne Rich and an Organic Feminist Criticism," author Marilyn R. Farwell argues that Adrienne Rich's poetry and essays form an original coherent feminist theory within feminist literary criticism. Rich's analysis of male and female societal principles states that the male principle is separation and objectivity, whereas the female principle is relationship and subjectivity (Farwell 193). The principle of subjectivity made its way into a vast amount of Rich's written work. A woman is subjected to marriage, heterosexuality, motherhood, femininity, or other, where the underlying cause is the will of men. Rich's radical beliefs made her traditional and formal education irrelevant and her poetry was difficult to critique through conventional standards (Templeton 337). Her poem, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law," explores the life of a woman on the brink of radicalization. Taking the story of "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law" as a prophecy, there are two poems that could be considered alternative endings, "Living in Sin" and "From a Survivor."

Adrienne Rich encapsulates the helplessness and internal struggles of the everywoman housewife in her poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law" by outlining common discontent. Rich utilizes "You" and "Yours" at the beginning to connect the reader to the protagonist. The first stanza recalls the protagonist's past as a beautiful young woman with a hopeful future. Though

this train of thought quickly sours into the disappointing reality of the present. Rich writes, “Your mind now, moldering like wedding-cake, / heavy with useless experience” (lines 7-8), indicating the protagonist got married and now wastes away while fulfilling the roles of mother and wife. Whatever dreams she once had are now irrelevant and impossible. The tone transitions from the suffering of an unfulfilled woman working night and day to serve her husband to an encouraging and inspired call to action for women who have sacrificed their happiness and ambition to become what was expected of them (Sharma). The second to last stanza is optimistically unsure: “Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge / breasted and glancing through the currents” (lines 111-112). Relating strongly to the theme of domestic confinement, the protagonist of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law” struggles to fulfill expectations amidst her inner turmoil, resulting in overwhelming dissatisfaction.

In a parallel scenario, “Living in Sin” sees a young woman living unmarried with a man in an apartment. The speaker of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law” hopes to achieve liberation when deciding she can no longer suffer through her day-to-day. The protagonist of “Living in Sin,” however, experiences her dissatisfaction in waves of subtle regret. Immediately there is a sense of discontent and shattered fantasy: “She had thought the studio would keep itself;” (line 1). Whatever life the protagonist had pictured in her apartment with her partner was unrealistic. Her apartment is dirty and she is unimpressed with her partner as he goes out to purchase cigarettes (line 18). She starts cleaning while he is gone and releases her anger by letting “the coffee-pot boil over on the stove” (line 22). In “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law” the protagonist came to terms with her mental anguish and ventured out to change her daily life. Conversely, the protagonist of “Living in Sin” falls back into her disillusionment and, “By evening she was back in love again” (line 23). Although, the last few lines allude to her continued dissatisfaction. She

lives in sin, as implied by the title because she lives with a man with whom she is romantically involved but not married. The rigid limitations and constraints placed on women in the mid-twentieth century did not hold to this woman, yet she was still unhappy with her relationship. In the end, she did not achieve enlightenment, so to speak, and continued as she was.

Alternatively, and sometime after the suicide of her ex-husband, Adrienne Rich wrote “From a Survivor,” a poem that explores the speaker’s relationship with her husband. The poem uses “I” and “we” throughout, but it cannot be assumed that Rich wished to be interpreted as the speaker. The poem begins with the mention of a pact, presumably marriage or love, made between men and women. The speaker is enlightened and claims that the couple did not know what was in store for them because, “Like everybody else, we thought of ourselves as special” (line 9). Her marriage was far from happy, and she no longer idolizes him. She states that his body “is no longer the body of a god or anything with power over my life” (lines 14-16), meaning that he cannot control who she is or what she does anymore. She describes him as “wastefully dead” (line 18) and her life after him, without him, is better. This speaker, unlike the one in “Living in Sin” has managed to escape her dissatisfaction, as well as her confinement to marriage, motherhood, and implied heterosexuality. “From a Survivor” is a response to the uncertainty at the end of “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law.” At the end of all the monotony and subjugation was a better, more authentic existence for the protagonist to inhabit. A life where she would no longer be constrained by the objectification and exploitation that was socially justifiable for the period.

Adrienne Rich’s dedicated themes of subjugation, oppression, objectification, and forced domestic and heterosexual confinement define her poetic style. “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law” acts as a prophecy in this set of poems, where the protagonist could take either road. One

towards salvation, a life free from the constraints that are imposed upon her, and one of resigned acceptance. "From a Survivor" and "Living in Sin" encapsulate these two outcomes respectively. Rich used her experience as a mother, wife, and woman to guide her feminist poetry. Rich's poetry expands far beyond the scope of women's confinement, but it all circles back to the idea of crossing boundaries and deviating from the rigid expectations of society. Behind each of her poems was the voice of an organic feminist, breaking free from the limitations of inauthenticity. Today her poetry remains remarkably relevant in the ongoing fight for women's liberation across the world.

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