

Conceiving the Separation of Women: Analyzing the Poetry of Pregnancy and Motherhood in *The Dream of a Common Language*

COLLEEN McDONELL

ABSTRACT

In her collection of poetry, *A Dream of a Common Language* (1978), Adrienne Rich pushes past conventional conceptions of motherhood and looks deeper at its association with women's disenfranchisement. She explores how women become separated not only from each other, but also from different facets of their selves when they have children. This paper argues that Rich uses images of conception, pregnancy, and birth, to prompt the reader to analyze how the institution of motherhood is defined by a patriarchal system that denigrates the relationships and expressive outlets a woman has outside of the caregiver role. It is the problematic values of this system that promote the disconnection of mothers from their daughters, sisters, and friends.

The standard perception of motherhood is that it epitomizes a woman's life; she is thought to be fulfilled with love, joy, and personal attainment at the moment her child enters the world. However, Adrienne Rich expresses something that many women are afraid to admit – the hardships and disappointments that may be a part of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. As a mother of three and a lesbian, Rich draws on experiences of her own womanhood and interactions with women in her collection of poems, *The Dream of a Common Language*. In it, she claims that relationships women share are powerful, saying "...the connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet".¹ She then identifies that these connections are torn apart through women's obligations to their husbands, fathers, and children. Though

1 "Adrienne Rich Quotes," Good Reads, accessed Feb 23, 2013, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/111082-the-connections-between-and-among-women-are-the-most-feared>

Rich does not reject the notion of motherhood, she laments its ability to distance women from their true selves, as well as from their sisters, mothers, friends, and female lovers. In *The Dream of a Common Language*, she despondently recognizes that childbirth not only represents a physical separation from child and mother; but also that the male-dominant culture defining the institution of motherhood can bereave women from each other and themselves. Through the imagery of pregnancy and motherhood, Rich grieves that the estrangement of women ultimately derives from a society centered on male control.

Rich first depicts women's power of unification in the poem "Phantasia for Elvira Shateyev", portraying Shateyev and the other female climbers as having conceived a dream. Each of the women were pregnant with an idea to climb a mountain and claim that "for months for years each one of us/ had felt her own yes growing in her/ slowly forming."² Like a child, each woman's hope grew inside herself in preparation for the climb. When the women came together to conquer Lenin Peak, they were more powerful as a unit than as separate individuals, since their conceived dreams made them stronger. In this poem, Rich uses the imagery of pregnancy to bring women together. These women could reach their full potential in collective motherhood because they were distanced from men and therefore not tied to familial obligations. Rich emphasizes the power of united women through Shateyev's voice saying, "we have always been in danger/ down in our separateness/ and now up here together but till now/ we had not touched our strength."³ It is only when these women join in a world seemingly devoid of men – atop a mountain – that they find power in motherhood. In a later poem addressing a lover, Rich again uses imagery of conception to portray the strength of the connection between women: "Conceived/ of each other, conceived each other in a darkness/ which I remember as drenched in light."⁴ Without men, the two females have symbolically formed themselves through and with each other. In a dark and desolate period of male dominance, they have witnessed a glimmer of hope for lesbians – and all women – in reconstituting their own lives.

2 Adrienne Rich, *A Dream of a Common Language* (New York: W.W Norton & Company , 1993);4.

3 *Ibid.*, 6.

4 *Ibid.*, 9.

Rich further emphasizes the connections developed by women by depicting the bonds between female relatives. In “Sibling Mysteries”, Rich analyzes her ties with both her sister and her mother through the imagery of childbirth. She reminds her sister of their natural relations to each other in that their “lives were driven down the same dark canal”⁵ of their mother, and thus, they must share a primitive connection. She also recognizes how she and her sister share a special event with their mother, “we remem her in our childbirth visions.”⁶ In her essay, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich explains how this special bond between mothers and daughters is formed. She writes:

Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other - beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival - a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal - the knowledge flowing between two similar bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.⁷

As a baby girl is growing inside her mother, the womb can be considered exclusively female and the one place that cannot be influenced by men. Through the imagery of pregnancy and birth, Rich demonstrates how the innate connections between sisters and between mother and daughter begin in, and revolve around, a space free of male influence.

Although Rich purports in *The Dream of a Common Language* that women have an almost umbilical connection to each other, she argues that men can separate women both directly and indirectly. Through imagery of conception in “Sibling Mysteries,” Rich argues that her father distanced his daughters from each other biologically. She tells her sister that she can, “feel the separateness/ of cells in us, split second choice/ of one ovum for one sperm.”⁸ The father is portrayed as an intrusive and separating force in his contribution to the women’s genetic life. Rich’s relationship with her sister remains strained and uncommunicative for most of their lives until their father no longer becomes the head of their household. The sisters were distanced from each other but, “then one

5 Ibid., 51.

6 Ibid., 48.

7 Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 221.

8 Rich, *The Dream*, 51.

whole night/ [their] father dying upstairs”⁹ the two made a connection with each other by “talking until the birds sang.”¹⁰ When their father’s law was no longer looming over the women, they became free to revert back to their intuitive infant connection with each other.

Rich sadly recognizes that the patriarchal state antagonizes the intimate connections sisters, mothers, and female lovers have with one another in motherhood. In the collection of poems, she demonstrates that just as she and her sister lacked communication with each other because of the influence of their father, all women have a linguistic connection that seems to break when women become vulnerable to male power. She states in the poem “Cartographies of Silence” that “each speaker of the so-called common language feels/ the ice floe drift apart/ as if powerless,”¹¹ suggesting that women can feel the loss of a mutual language and thus a loss of understanding between one another. The distancing of women is echoed again when the tribal women of “Sibling Mysteries” witness the “boats of skin on the ice floe/ - the pregnant set to drift, / too many mouths for feeding.”¹² Thus, the image of the ice floe can represent both the metaphorical and literal separation of women through pregnancy and motherhood. Rich provokes a powerful message in employing the imagery of women being exiled simply because they are pregnant. She contrasts the fathers off the tribe as having “sucked the bones/ and struck their bargains”¹³ with the notion that there is not enough food for the unborn children. It is therefore the women who have to suffer because of motherhood and are separated from one another by patriarchal culture.

Rich uses the imagery of delivery again in the final poem, “Transcendental Etude” to further emphasize her grief over the separation of women. She believes that, “birth stripped our birthright from us,/ tore us from a woman, from women, from ourselves/ so early on.”¹⁴ Rich provokes a powerful message to the reader in the words “stripped” and “tore”; she is not shying away from the violence of childbirth. Instead,

9 Ibid., 51.

10 Ibid., 51.

11 Ibid., 16.

12 Ibid., 50.

13 Ibid., 50.

14 Ibid., 75.

she is accentuating the physical pain of delivery to mirror her grief in the separation of woman from woman. Furthermore, she argues that women truly do lose something when born; something personal and belonging to them. Rich suggests that, through birth, women suffer the loss of their voice; their partaking in the “common language” of women is lost before it really began, and remains only a fetal dream. Not only do daughters lose their voice, mothers do as well. In “Hunger”, Rich grieves for those women less fortunate in Käthe Kollwitz’s portraits of “‘mothers’ drained of milk, the ‘survivors’ driven/ to self-abortion, self-starvation.”¹⁵ These women who are, or who were, mothers have lost their joy and voice in life only “to be driven to a vision bitter, concrete, and wordless.”¹⁶ By ending the stanza with “wordless” Rich sends a ringing message to the reader that these women cannot express themselves after experiencing motherhood within a patriarchal framework, and thus become further separated from each other through their silence.

Adrienne Rich grieves that women must split themselves into different parts when they become mothers. They lose full agency over their lives and must embark on a road which follows the norms and expectations of motherhood. In “To a Poet” Rich addresses the empty, silenced woman who has lost her creative voice in order to be a nurturing mother. Beginning with the words “ice splits,”¹⁷ the poem immediately addresses the “splitting” the mother feels between her two selves. She strives to be an idealized “imago”¹⁸ in the minds of her children, and in doing so, negates her potential for being an artist. Rich empathizes with the dissociation the woman is experiencing and recognizes that the duties the woman has as a mother may be overbearing, “small mouth, needy, suck you: This is love.”¹⁹ However, she is dejected about the woman’s splitting of herself. She writes not to the poet “who fights to write [her] own/ words fighting up walls”, but to the woman who is muted in her domesticity. The woman Rich is addressing is “dumb/ with loneliness”²⁰ even though she has children to keep her company. The standards of motherhood that patriarchal society has instilled upon this

15 Ibid., 14.

16 Ibid., 14.

17 Ibid., 15.

18 Ibid., 15.

19 Ibid., 15.

20 Ibid., 15.

woman and her family have confined her to her duties as an immediate caregiver. Rich juxtaposes the interconnectedness women feel in the womb with the house in which the mother is enclosed – shut out from other people. The mother is slowly being drained of her potential for autonomy as she lives in this “house/ where language floats and spins/ abortion in/ the bowl.”²¹ Here, Rich uses imagery of abortion as a double-edged sword. The egg yolks can remind the woman that she had the option of not having these children; that she could have refused to become pregnant, or upon discovering she was, she could have terminated the pregnancy. Additionally, in the aborted eggs Rich symbolizes a loss of the woman’s personal voice. Though her language tries to come to life as it “floats and spins”²² like the yolks in the bowl, ultimately it has died, just as did the potential baby fowl. Rich grieves at women’s loss of potential, and demonstrates so through charged imagery of pregnancy and motherhood.

Rich further emphasizes the loss of women’s artistic potential through imagery of birth. In a moment of unfulfillment and insecurity on “Upper Broadway”, she looks at her reflection only to see “a half-born woman.”²³ However, Rich then ascribes the problem of sacrificing artistic life for motherhood in the poem “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff”. In this poem, Paula recognizes that in her marriage and pregnancy she is incredibly distanced from both Clara and her painting:

Which of us, Clara, hasn’t had to take that leap/ out beyond our
being women/ to save our work? or is it to save ourselves?/
Marriage is lonelier than solitude./ Do you know: I was dreaming
I had died/ giving birth to the child./ I couldn’t paint or speak or
even move.²⁴

Paula shares how her ability to make art is stunted by her fear of dying in childbirth. She has lost her agency even before giving birth, and when the time comes to deliver her child she murmurs “What a pity!”²⁵ as she hemorrhages to death. Rich uses the images of Paula’s feared and experienced childbirth to demonstrate how women can become discon-

21 Ibid., 15.

22 Ibid., 15.

23 Ibid., 41.

24 Ibid., 43.

25 Ibid., 42.

nected from their artistic lives and freedom. In her essay *Of Woman Born*, Rich speaks of her own personal struggle with being both a poet and a mother: “There are times when I feel only death will free us from [our children], when I envy the barren woman who has the luxury of her regrets but lives a life of privacy and freedom.”²⁶ The barren woman cannot partake in the primary function of the institution of motherhood dominated by male-centered values and thus has the chance to reach her artistic potential.

Rich also questions how, through the theme of motherhood, patriarchal Western society continuously separates women. It is perpetrated through a cycle that begins with a pregnancy, a birth of a daughter, and that daughter’s subsequent pregnancy. As a feminist, Rich recognizes in grief that the striving for women’s liberation is ongoing, and she argues near the end of the collection that every woman is “forced to begin in the midst of the hardest movement,/the one already sounding as we are born.”²⁷ The movement towards women’s equality and freedom is continuously dismantled by the oppressive forces of a society where men possess the majority of power. In “Hunger”, Rich angrily states that “yes, that male god acts on us and our children/ that male State acts on us and our children.”²⁸ She uses “us” to address herself and other mothers, claiming that women are the recipients of an oppression operating through a male-influenced religious and political power.

In the 1996 film *Listening for Something* Rich claims others considered her neurotic in the 1950s and 60s because she was a married mother of three but felt unfulfilled. However, she realized this feeling of dissatisfaction with her life was something that many women felt but were unable to express. Whether they were oppressed in their sexuality, or in their mundane domestic lives in nuclear families, women were not often allowed to live to their full potentials – to be artists, for example. She advocates not for or against motherhood, but sends a strong and clear message to other women that they must choose their own happiness. To take agency over your own life, you must not be silent or let

26 Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 1.

27 Rich, *The Dream*, 73.

28 *Ibid.*, 13.

society choose a path for you. She says in the section “Twenty One Love Poems”, “Only she who says/ she did not choose, is the loser in the end.”²⁹

Through the imagery of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood Adrienne Rich displays her grief in the bereavement of women from each other and themselves. She argues in *The Dream of a Common Language* that it is not the experience of motherhood that separates women, but rather the institution of motherhood. Indeed, there are many loving, nurturing men within the overall influence of a male-centered society. She does provide examples for how women can unite and be powerful in their pregnancies and motherhood. However, the coming together of women to reach their full potentials is limited due to the oppressive nature of a patriarchal culture. Rich claims that “...the patriarchal institution of motherhood is not the ‘human condition’ any more than rape, prostitution, and slavery are.”³⁰ Women will continuously be artificially separated from each other both physically, emotionally, and linguistically through pregnancy and birth. Through the imagery of abortion, Rich analyzes the notion of wasted potential in motherhood. Rich thematically argues that a woman needs to choose her own path in life in order to maintain both a relationship with others and her true self.

WORKS CITED

Listening for Something. Dir. Dionne Brand. Perf. Dionne Brand, and Adrienne Rich. National Film Board of Canada, 1996. Film.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Bantam Books, 1977.

Rich, Adrienne. *The Dream of a Common Language*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993.

“Adrienne Rich Quotes.” Good Reads. Accessed February 23, 2013, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/111082-the-connections-between-and-among-women-are-the-most-feared>

²⁹ Ibid., 33.

³⁰ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 15.