



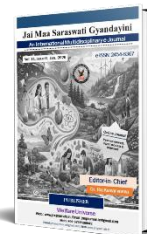
Jai Maa Saraswati Gyandayini

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(Peer-reviewed, Open Access & Indexed)

Journal home page: www.jmsjournals.in, ISSN: 2454-8367

Vol. 11, Issue-III, Jan. 2026



Debunking Heterosexuality: A Radical Critique of Marriage in Adrienne Riches Poetry

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KEYWORDS

Heterosexuality, Debunk, Premise, Sexuality, Radical Philosophy, Assy metrical.

ABSTRACT

The Struggle for woman's emancipation had a long history. Despite fighting for an egalitarian society, since antiquity, women failed to discern the main cause of their exploitation at the hands of their male counterparts. However, towards the second half of Twentieth Century female writers under the influence of feminist theorising investigated the very oppressive nature of male- female relationships and found a close nexus between their sexual lives and socio-political institutions. After a critical analysis of patriarchal ideology, 2nd wave feminists argued that oppression of women has strong foundations in socio-cultural processes rather than in female biology.

Taking this clue Adrienne Rich took a daring journey through the institution of marriage to evaluate and reorient its basic premise. As an activist, academician, writer and theoretician Rich formulated a theoretical concept to critique heterosexuality. Therefore, the paper makes an attempt to understand the basic premise of the institution of marriage. An attempt is also made to demonstrate Rich's radical critique of heterosexuality as the corner stone of patriarchy. For this the paper foregrounds its theoretical background in feminist theorizing, besides applying Rich's own critical concepts.

As a gender, women share in the everyday social, political, economic and psychological oppressions at the hands of their masculine counterparts. The enormity of this shared experience across time forced women to question its logical premise. In the gradual process of analysis and investigation that stretches across centuries, women discerned that the cause for inequalities between the sexes

lies not in nature or biology but in what Carole Pateman calls in *Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy* (1987), “the patriarchal reality of a social structure of inequality and the domination of women by men”. (Pateman, 1987) Moreover, this patriarchal ideology blesses half of its race with male-power privilege and appropriates a subservient position to its female sex. To promote

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53724/jmsg/v11n3.05>

Received 12th Nov. 2025; Accepted 20th Dec. 2025

Available online 30th Jan. 2026

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female entrapment, patriarchy employs socio-cultural institutions that create, maintain, sanction and propagate certain gendered norms and behaviors in different sexes. (Pateman, 1987)

The first and foremost social institution that women thinkers have confronted from antiquity is the institution of marriage. Based on the traditional myth of the romantic glorification of love and romance, this institution cherished a natural sanction, social sanctity, cultural privilege, and religious approbation, etc. Idealized as the only “natural norm”, the heterosexist marriage attained a symbolic significance in every woman’s life. With this traditional fervor and symbolism attached to it, marriage according to radical feminists, remains the ultimate cultural practice to oppress women. Thus, entering into marriage and the observance of subsequent social Obligations that it entails perpetuates women’s space within the four walls of the house and promotes their physical, biological and intellectual bankruptcy by commodifying their sexist bodies. As a consequence, heteronormativity jeopardizes a woman's emancipation and reduces her social prestige to the extent of an enslaved person. (Firestone, 1970; Millett, 1970).

Although the institution received patronage and exuberant rendering in literary writings of male writers from classical to modern times, women writers from early times displayed an ambivalent attitude towards it. The Cavendish sisters raised the earliest signs of dissatisfaction against it during the Elizabethan Age. Similarly, in her marriage poetry, Anne Bradstreet punctures its validity and sanctity in Puritan England by thematizing the stress and strain that married life exposed the women of her

times. Her poem “To My Dear and Loving Husband” embodies an ironical rendering of the Puritan demands of extreme devotion and love that marriage presupposes a woman owes to her husband. (Bradstreet, 1981). She writes;

*My love is such that rivers cannot
quench*

*Nor ought but love from thee give
recompense. Thy love is such I can
no way repay,*

*The heavens reward thee manifold;
I pray (Bradstreet 225)*

Under the slogan of liberal enlightenment, a few women of ideas mustered the courage to show dissent against its social construction. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft perceived and questioned the subservient position of women within marriage. Taking a dig at the “divine rights of husbands”, she argues that marriage strangles the natural rights of women to the extent of an enslaved person and asserts that “the divine right of husbands, like the divine right of kings, may, it is hoped in this enlightened age, be contested without danger” (67). Similarly, Emily Dickinson raised her concern regarding heterosexual marriage. Most of her poems, while enacting the domesticity of women brought about by marriage, reflect her deep anguish over the enforced heterosexuality. Most of her poems viz “I Tie My Hat- I Crease my Shawl”, “She Sweeps with Many-Colored Brooms”, “I am ‘Wife’- I Have Finished That”, and “Title Divine- is mine!” etc. record her strong and inspiring arguments against the institution of marriage. Her marriage boils down to “Born- Bridled/Shrouded-

in a Day”. (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1995).

However, provocative arguments with pioneering theoretical insights against the relevance of marriage began to pour in at the beginning of the first half of the 20th century. In her path-breaking work *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf builds a query about conjugal bliss, which marriage embodies in itself. (Dickinson, 1998).

These voices of dissent against female entrapment in marriage were spasmodic and were brewing within the boundaries of the academy during the middle of the 20th century. However, these voices gained momentum due to the end masse participation of women in contemporary progressive movements. Under these influences, the women's movement witnessed a cult following among ordinary women and the academic elite. The movement helped to usher in a societal transformation that recognized women's role and position in private and public and valued their ideas as significant and revolutionary. As a result, women broke the silence and embraced radical articulation of innate truths about their bodies and beings. With these stark revelations about the female body, its unbound potential and female sexuality; women writers struck at the roots of oppressive masculine ideology that has a sexist basis embedded in the female body. (Woolf, 1929). This helped to make marriage, a cherished socio-cultural institution of patriarchy, come under the brunt of feminist critical inquiry. Most feminist writers began to question the validity of this cultural practice. Such queries about marriage embodied in themselves the seeds of a radical philosophy which began to perceive it as an

oppressive containment for women. While articulating their dismay about marriage, the radicals launched a critical investigation into its gendered foundations. They found historical, social and legal inequalities embedded in its structure, which in turn coerced every woman into heterosexual marriage. This led them to pronounce marriage as the chief instrument for circumscribing and subjugating women through appropriating and maintaining the role of wife. While examining it as a patriarchal ploy to entice women, radicals brought to the fore the severe impacts of heterosexuality on women's lives in general and relations in particular. In this connection, the research findings of Marxist feminist historian Linda Gordon are of prime importance. Describing heterosexuality as the leading institution that underpins masculine ideology of dominance and oppression, Gordon proclaims in *Feminism Unfinished* (2014), “for women heterosexual relations are always intense, frightening, high-risk situations which ought, if a woman has any sense of self-preservation, to be carefully calculated” (196). These observations led Sheila Cronin to claim in her essay “Marriage” that emancipation of their race “can’t be won without the abolition of marriage”. (Beauvoir, 1949/2011; Friedan, 1963). These revelations proved instrumental in granting the space and articulation to lesbian feminists to help debunk the ideology that promotes heterosexuality as the only natural state of being. Quoting a group of lesbian feminist separatists, in “Not for Lesbians Only”, (Bunch, 1975). Charlotte Bunch sums up the main aim of lesbian philosophy, which is “a political critique of the

institution and ideology of heterosexuality as a cornerstone of male supremacy. It is an extension of the analysis of sexual politics to an analysis of sexuality as an institution”.

Taking cognizance of these radical quires Rich was the first to pioneer cause of investigating heterosexuality on distinctive line. As a radical lesbian Rich attaches an exclusive significance to family in constructing and inculcating female gender in a girl child, and it is the family as a social institution that has a strong foundational basis in marriage. Thus, Rich argues that the prime motive of feminist theorizing should be radical critique of marriage since it leaves women bereft of their person and identity. As a feminist thinker, she attempts to expose the biased nature of family and marriage and the acculturation process these institutions employ to generate a sense of female gender in the female sex. To do so, Rich thermalizes her personal life, showing that she lived as a blessed daughter, a marginalized daughter-in-law, a beleaguered mother, and a free woman.

From her infancy, Rich developed a complicated relationship with her parents. The couple shaped their household on patriarchal lines and offered an orthodox and authoritative family environment to nourish its children. The family not only prescribed the Jewish code of life but exclusively cultivated a highly competitive intellect in their daughters. Under these circumstances, Rich’s early childhood offers the perfect example of social constructionism. As a young child, she grew in the lap of John Rich - a colossal patriarch. In her father’s kingdom, the juvenile Rich cherished a

blessed and favorable patronage to make her father’s dream come true. She describes her early life as being “raised as a son, taught to study but not to pray, taught to hold reading and writing sacred” (Blood 222). Rich’s exposure to masculine ideology in social and academic arenas precipitated a fascinating desire to identify herself with masculine hegemony. This overbearing presence manifested in embracing an androgynous model at the basic level of her life and writing. In the poem “The Stranger”, Rich proclaims “, I am the androgyne” (Gelpi 53) to celebrate both masculine and feminine existence.

A Change of World (1951) and The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems (1955), the first two collections of Rich’s poetry, show an ambivalent approach towards the masculine principle. While appreciating androgyny, the female voice of these collections takes pleasure in remaining submerged and entrapped under masculinity. Most of the poems employ viewed images that celebrate masculinity as the omnipotent mode of being. For instance, “The Unsaid Word” invests man with luxurious growth and emancipation. The “Uncle Speaks in the Drawing Room” celebrates masculinity as “a bastion of refinement and order”. However, her second encounter with the masculine, which involved a symbolic shift from a blessed daughter to an oppressed daughter-in-law and wife, proved disastrous and revealed to her a new perspective on the inherent masculine ideology that pervaded a heterosexist relationship. Her marriage to Alfred Conrad, a Harvardian economist, “a Jew of the wrong kind from an Eastern European background”, made her aware of

a married woman's invisibility and marginality in socio-familial spheres. Born with a sharp observing and unique feminist sensibility, Rich transforms this first-hand experience as an ordinary housewife into the subject matter of poetry. *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters* (1955) dramatize the detached and objective feelings of a third- person female persona who cautiously guards herself in a less-than- perfect marriage. Later justifying it as her strategic skill, Rich describes the phenomena as "part of the strategy like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials, I couldn't pick up barehanded" (*On Lies* 40-41). Thus, written under the creed of formalism, these poems are replete with what Rich calls "stress marks of anger and the strains of self-division" (*On Lies* 22). In this connection, Judith McDaniel writes, "while apparently accepting the traditional female roles in early life, nonetheless feelings of strain and stifled emotion characterize Adrienne Rich's first two volumes" (Gelpi 311). The first two volumes referred here are *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters* (1955). Passing through this early phase of her life, Rich started creative writing, especially at a time when the "redemptive bond of faithful wives", which includes standard as well as academic elite, was retiring to cherish a celebrated domestic career; Rich preferred a covert way to target heterosexuality.

In such circumstances, Rich displays a feminist eagerness and urgency to raise heterosexuality as a "central, social and political issue radiating outward in all women's lives and not an individual woman's dilemma and personal experience"

(*Blood* 93). Since her prolonged and irrational relationship exposed her to the harsh realities that marriage embodies for women, she appeals women to understand and analyze the phenomenon that "lets their powers, their resourcefulness, their bravery, their intelligence run down the drain of the kitchen sink" (*Blood* 94).

Despite raising such illuminating and radical queries about heterosexuality in her early work, the young Rich put strenuous efforts in her real married life to achieve a balance "between her energy of creation and energy of relationship" (*On Lies* 43) but could not bear the brunt of patriarchal familial life. The sufferings, day-to-day problems and subsequent discomfort made her undergo therapy, which Donald Hard describes as "a diet of dissatisfaction" (qtd. in Cooper 214). This displeasure, disgust, angst and anxiety form the structural and thematic core of her poetry collections *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) and *Diving into the Wreck* (1973). Praising *Snapshots of a daughter-in- Law* for embodying a married woman's concerns, Philip Booth records, "The risk this book quietly takes on, it impressively fulfils, is no less than to get life said" (qtd.in Cooper 215).

Rich's experience as a heterosexist posits before her that the male is the main contributor to the oppression of her race, and marriage perpetuates all kinds of exploitations - physical, psychological, political, and economic. As such, in her subsequent collections, Rich overtly criticizes this universal cultural ritual to expose its biased ideological foundations that define, contain and create women within a patriarchal society. To reveal this, she

describes how marriage wrenches a woman's freedom, body, self and identity.

Most of the poems in her first two volumes attempt to fathom the various problems marriage involves a woman with. The poems especially "Storm Warnings", "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", "An Unsaid Word", "The Lioness" in *A Change of World* and "Living in Sin", "Diamond Cutters" in *The Diamond Cutters* and "The Roof Walker", "Snapshots of a daughter-in-Law" and "A Marriage in the Sixties" in the *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* collection, record Rich's primary attempts to experience and express the problems of a married woman. "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" achieves prominence as it portrays, on a literal and symbolic level, the microcosm of an oppressive patriarchal set-up for a daughter-in-law.

Rich believes marriage fosters docility, obedience and a subordinate position for a woman in social and familial spheres. While investing the man with extraordinary power to control his counterpart, marriage appropriates a circumscribed life for women. However, Rich, being an "ingenious strategist" in the poem, takes recourse to vivid imagery to reveal the imprisoned and prescribed life of a daughter-in-law. (Rich, A. (1951).

In the poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" she uses the image of a ring – as the symbol of enclosure which marriage gifts a woman:

*The massive weight of uncle's wedding
band,
Sits heavily on Aunt Jennifer's hand
When aunt is dead, her terrified hands will
lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered*

by

With its massive weight, the wedding ring symbolizes the socio-cultural bindings appropriated by the marital bond in which a married woman remains immersed throughout her life. Thus, marriage approves a literal enslavement of a woman - at the physical and intellectual level. While inculcating a life of constraint, fear and subjugation, the marriage wrenches a woman from physical and creative abilities to make her life fit as an ornamental and decorative object of male domination. Despite being a woman of free spirit and unbound potential, she remains buried under the colossal power and "massive weight" associated with her uncle's wedding ring. It becomes cumbersome for a married woman to bypass social obligations and customary practices. Her creative artefacts are more vibrant and energetic than her real life. Similarly in the poems "The Lioness", "Leaving in Sin" and "Autumn Equinox" Richs reveals the disillusionment in a conventional marriage.

Rich's powerful but critical stance against heterosexuality was instrumental in divesting marriage of its socio-cultural legacy and religious aura. As was evident, her radical scrutiny of heterosexuality triggered a debate, and her provocative views regarding marriage brought it to the center of feminist literary criticism. Cora Kaplan registered a strong rebuttal against opinions expressed in the essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980). In *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism*, Kaplan argues against her idea of equating all-inclusive masculine power with heterosexuality.

However, a crucial look into Rich's thought-provoking works *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (1986) and *On Lies Secrets and Silence* (1980) gives a lie to these charges labelled against Rich for bringing every kind of exploitation meted out by women into the canvas of heterosexuality. It becomes evident that she has succeeded in persuading women, including heterosexual women and lesbians, to take a critical review of the privileged institution of marriage. While grounding herself in a historical context shared by Emily Dickinson and Simone De Beauvoir, Rich's radical dismantling of marriage won critical acclaim in contemporary feminist debates. In this connection, Sheilla Jeffrey argues, "heterosexuality is not indicted, only the force necessary to get women to participate is what is evident in Rich's attacks" (297). (Rich, A. (1951).

Rich's radical critique of heterosexuality is reviewed by Liz Yorke in *Adrienne Rich: Passion, Politics and the Body*. While appreciating Rich's daring analysis of heterosexual marriage, Liz Yorke dismisses Kaplan's charge against Rich as "wilful and in itself a reductionist misreading of Rich's thesis in compulsory heterosexuality". (Rich, A. (1951).

With these critical reviews, Rich's appeal to heterosexual women to reconsider the ideology that backs heterosexuality gained significance in contemporary feminist debates.

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