

From Romantic Fantasy to Domestic Reality: A Feminist Reading of Adrienne Rich's 'Living in Sin'

¹ Nishi Arora

¹ Assistant Professor, PG Department of English, SCD Government College, Ludhiana

ABSTRACT

Adrienne Rich's famous poem "Living in Sin" aims to present a penetrating examination of the disparity that exists between romantic expectations and mundane realities of domestic life. Through the experiences of the unnamed woman living with her lover, Adrienne Rich explores the deteriorating 'idealised love' as a concept that was prevalent by then, along with the emergence of disappointment, emotional alienation and, domestic drudgery. The poem employs vivid imagery, aptly suggestive diction, free verse, enjambment, personification and, contrasting visual images making it a sensuous experience for the readers, along with a peep into the psychological aspect of the speaker. For Rich, the neglected studio, dirty windows, leaky taps, empty bottles, Persian shawl, piano, mirror and, milkman are not merely objects of description; they become symbolic elements, thereby revealing the speaker's emotional state of mind. The exceptional contrast between beautiful expectations and unpleasant realities form the central tension of this poem. Rich has also challenged the conventional romantic representations of relationships by presenting love within the framework of everyday life, labour, disorder, fatigue, fret, fumes and, emotional dissatisfaction. Thus, Rich's "Living in Sin" becomes a study of conflict between fantasy and reality and the difficulties of sustaining intimacy within the ordinary domestic existence.

I INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich is one of the most influential, visionary, uncompromising, outright American poets of the twentieth century, whose poetry frequently aims to examine and raise questions pertaining to gender, identity, human relationships, social structures and, experiences of women within

a patriarchal society. Her poetry stands differently from her contemporaries due to her poetry's combination of personal experience and wider social criticism. Not treating the private world as something that is separate from political and social realities, Rich repeatedly demonstrates how apparently the personal experiences tend to reveal larger structures of power as well as cultural expectations. Her poem "Living in Sin," first published in *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), transforms an apparently 'ordinary domestic' situation into a complex exploration of 'romantic idealism', disappointment and, female experience. The title of the poem is significant within itself. The phrase 'living in sin', traditionally, carries moral as well as religious associations and was commonly used to describe an unmarried couple living together. Rich, however, uses this expression, in an ironic manner; the 'sin' of the poem is not simply the couple's unconventional domestic arrangement, it is also the emotional and psychological consequences of an attempt to sustain a relationship that fails to correspond to the idealised expectations that are associated with 'romantic love'. The woman has imagined a life that resembles a romantic picture; the picture of an aesthetically beautiful studio, a harmonious relationship and, a partner with whom the domestic existence would be 'effortless'. The reality, however, tends to consist of dust, dirty windows, leaking taps, empty bottles, household chores and, emotional distance. Louis Althusser's concept of ideology provides a useful explanation for the woman's initial expectations. Her belief that romantic love will produce a naturally harmonious, domestic existence may be understood as an ideological construction, rather than, as a purely

individual fantasy. The poem, indeed, exposes the conflict betwixt the cultural image of 'romantic fulfilment' and the material reality of maintaining a shared life.

The poem is, therefore, structured around a fundamental opposition between expectation and reality. The speaker's imagination initially transforms the studio into an almost 'self-sustaining' romantic space. Having said that, the material objects surrounding her, gradually expose the falseness of the fantasy. Rich's imagery is, notably, significant in establishing this conflict. The beautiful images such as the "plate of pears" and the "piano with a Persian shawl" both stand alongside the unpleasant images of dust, grime, taps and, "beetle eyes." The contrast, creates an atmosphere in which beauty and ugliness, romance and boredom, desire and disappointment, 'co-exist'.

The poem is also remarkable for its treatment of domestic labour. The speaker discovers that romantic companionship cannot remove the ordinary responsibilities of everyday existence. Tasks like cleaning, making the bed, dealing with household disorders and, responding to the demands of daily routine – all of them, become reminders that her imagined romantic life is impossible to maintain, eternally. In this regard, the poem can also be read as an early exploration of the tension that exists between romantic ideology and women's domestic experience. Rich does not simply describe an unhappy relationship; she examines the cultural fantasy through which women may imagine love and domestic life as naturally 'fulfilling'. As in Betty Friedan, her "the problem that has no name" illuminates the unnamed woman's dissatisfaction in Rich's poem. Her unhappiness does not arise from a mere single dramatic catastrophe, it rather, develops gradually through the repetitive encounter with the domestic routine and emotional 'disappointment' (Friedan 15). Judith Butler's theory of 'gender performativity' further illuminates the women's relationship with domestic space. The woman's

identity is not represented simply as an innate feminine essence; rather, her encounter with cleaning, bed-making and, household maintenance demonstrates how gender becomes associated with 'repeated' social practises.

Through free verse, enjambment, personification, striking imagery and, carefully selected diction, Adrienne Rich gives us a poetic form, that reflects this psychological conflict. The poem's movement from night to morning, further reinforces the opposition betwixt fantasy and reality. Night, temporarily permits intimacy and escape, whereas, morning restores the speaker to the material and emotional circumstances from which she, the speaker, cannot permanently escape.

II ABOUT THE POET

Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) was an American poet, essayist, literary critic and, a feminist thinker whose work occupies an important position in the twentieth-century American literature. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, she began publishing poetry at an early age and also developed into a writer, who is deeply concerned with questions of gender, identity, language, politics and, social injustice. Her poetry gradually moved away from the ambit of formal poetic conventions like in her early works towards more of an experimental and politically engaged mode of expression. Her later writings, particularly, challenged conventional assumptions about women's roles and the relationship between private experience and public structures.

Her significance as a feminist poet lies partly in her ability to transform apparently ordinary experiences into subjects of high seriousness, intellectually as well as politically inquiring about certain aspects such as the domestic life, marriage, motherhood, sexuality, loneliness and, interpersonal relationships that frequently become sites through which the larger cultural expectations are examined. Her poetry raises questions on the social structures that act as a determining force on how women are expected to behave and what they are expected to desire. Virginia Woolf's association of the 'personal space' with female

independence offers us yet another significant perspective on Rich's poem under study. The studio appears, initially, to promise the woman, a private space of intimacy and freedom. The idea of private space: a room may offer physical independence, but it does not automatically free a woman from the cultural expectations and material responsibilities attached to 'domestic life'. Elaine Showalter's feminist critique provides a useful framework for understanding Rich's treatment of women's experience in this poem. Her work emphasises the importance of examining literature through women's experiences and recognising subjects that have historically been marginalised within dominant literary traditions. Hélène Cixous' feminist emphasis on the articulation of women's experience, helps to further widen the significance of Rich's poetic subject matter. The poem under study, does not merely treat the woman's domestic dissatisfaction as trivial or insignificant. Rather, Rich transforms ordinary details such as dust, taps, sheets, bottles and, household objects, into a complex 'language system' of psychological experience. The poem, thereby, grants intellectual as well as emotional seriousness to the experiences that are traditionally dismissed as merely private or domestic.

Rich's poetic technique is quite relevant even in the present moment. She does not rely merely upon elaborate rhyme or conventional stanzaic patterns. Instead, her use of free verse and enjambment produces a conversational yet psychologically charged movement. Certain objects from ordinary domestic life become poetic symbols, while personification allows the studio, taps, stairs and, other ordinary objects to participate in the speaker's emotional world. Her language, hence, demonstrates how poetry can emerge from the apparently insignificant details of everyday existence.

III IMAGERY IN THE POEM

"Living in Sin" is a poem replete with images with multiple meanings. The subject of the poem is the reality of relationships versus the expectations of a

mate. The speaker in the poem is a woman. The poem begins with the line, "she had thought the studio would keep itself" (Rich, line1), meaning that she thought things would remain clean and spotless. Simone de Beauvoir's discussion on women's confinement within domestic set-up further provides an important framework, to understand the female protagonist's disillusionment in the poem. The woman, initially, imagines love as a form of liberation and aesthetic fulfilment. Although, her romantic fantasy gradually encounters the repetitive demands of domestic existence (Beauvoir 451). She had not thought that she would need to work at keeping up with the daily chores of the house. Dust-layered furniture, dirty windows panes, noisy taps: these are not pleasant images and certainly not the way in which one would like one's home to be, especially when once is married and thinks about the 'honeymoon phase' of marriage. The poem then switches to more picturesque images such as 'the plate of pears' (Rich, line 4), 'piano with a Persian shawl' (Rich, line 5). They denote the feelings of completeness and beauty that are anticipated by the speaker. The images that follow, however, bring to light the speaker's disenchantment with the reality of her situation. The "[cold] morning light" (Rich, line 9) and "[blank]sepulchral bottles" (line 11) describe her relationship that is dead like empty bottles of wine. The "beetle eyes" (line 13) that fix upon her mirror her own fear. Roland Barthes' concept of myth may be relevantly added here to understand the woman's romantic imagination as a culturally produced system of signs such as 'the plate of pears', 'piano with a Persian shawl' do not, merely function as decorative objects; they also contribute to an aesthetic mythology of 'romantic domestic life'.

The introduction of the lover in the poem is accompanied by negative images such as 'bread' and 'cigarettes.' The picture-perfect piano that the speaker describes in the beginning of the poem is, now declared, 'out of tune' by him, just like their

relationship. The “mirror” (line 19) symbolises the self-examination she does not wish to attempt. The “relentless milkman” (line 28) is a symbol of the awakening to the harsh reality every day.

IV DICTION AND SYNTAX

The diction of the poem is formal. The poet has used many long-learned words such as “relieved,” “picturesque,” “sepulchral” etc. Apart from this, the poet has also given animate attributes to inanimate things as in lines: “the studio would keep itself” (line 1), ‘vocal taps,’ ‘stair would writhe’ and so on. The poem is rich in images. many of which have been drawn from day-to-day life. Words like furniture, taps, windows, panes, kitchen shelf, saucers, table-top, sheet, milkman etc. belong to the lexical field – ‘HOME.’ They are indicators of a routine day in every household — a day of drudgery and boredom and not romantic as the woman in the poem had wished her days to be. But the poet has used marked collocations with some of these words like:

“furniture of love, taps less vocal, panes relieved of ---, stairs writhe---, cold morning light.”

Words like grime, dust, leaky taps, scraps, beetle eyes do not indicate a clean and well-kept house. They have a negative connotation. The poet has juxtaposed pleasant words with these unpleasant ones: Persian shawl, picturesque and amusing, to show the gap between expectation and reality. Words like cold, sepulchral, beetle eyes, pierced, demons: all give a feeling of sadness. This sadness has also been shown by using the past tense versus the present and short run-on lines that set the hopeless mood of the poem. Most of the lines end with nouns such as keyboard, pears, cat, mouse, bottles, saucers, mirror, cigarettes and demons. This is because the speaker is concerned with the material things in her life. She does not realize that the dishes can wait, but her lover may not be able to. The ‘had thought’ in the first line sets the tone of the entire poem. It shows a shift in perspective FROM moving in to after. In line 8, the expression ‘Not that’ again refers to her wish for the beautiful life which is so different from her present reality.

V RHYTHM

The poem is written in free verse with varying line length. Most of the lines of the poem are enjambed, making the poem move rapidly from image to image. There is no rhyme scheme which also produces a sense of disorder. The lines are relatively short. There is alliteration in lines like “a plate of pears,/ a piano with a Persian shawl” (lines 4-5) and “Sounded a dozen notes on the keyboard” (line 16) The short, run-on lines set the hopeless mood of the poem.

VI INTERPRETATION OF THE POEM

“Living in Sin” is a free verse poem about a woman’s fairy tale dream of marriage versus the reality of the sin of not loving each other. The subject of the poem is a woman starting life of hope and happiness in a perfect happiness relationship only to learn the true reality of the relationship. In her idealistic relationship, the speaker’s physical environment is free of daily domestic responsibilities. There is no need to dust or wash the windows because in her fantasy life, the studio will ‘keep itself’. Carolyn G. Heilbrun’s discussion on how women have, historically been given limited narratives through which to imagine their lives is also relevant in the context of this poem. It is highly pertinent to note here as the woman seems to have inherited a ‘pre-written’ romantic script. There are definitely no leaky or noisy faucets in need of repair. Much like the apartment, she did not expect to have to work on her relationship to keep it strong and make it last. She wishes the taps ‘less vocal’ meaning that there is a leaky faucet and the window panes are dirty. These are not pleasant images and certainly not the way one would like one’s home to be. Bell Hooks argues that love cannot be separated from structures of domination and social conditioning. Her reflections on love, provide a useful theoretical perspective on Rich’s work under study.

The poem then switches to more picturesque images such as the plate of pears and piano with a Persian shawl. The lines in this section of the poem are all enjambed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’

interpretation may be relevant here; the studio is an ambiguous domestic space that, initially, is imagined as a site of freedom and romantic independence. It gradually acquired the characteristics of psychological confinement. The woman, remains inside physically, in a space that she had imagined as something beautiful; yet it begins to confront and even mock her through its dust, disorder and, personified objects. Even though the speaker is describing pleasant things, the reader still feels chaos among the order. The poet observes the woman's life as sad and boring using the past tense versus the present and short run-on lines that set the hopeless mood of the poem. Imagery and colourful language is also used to describe the unhappy relationship. The poet's rhetoric illustrates the speaker's feeling of disappointment and pain: the milkman's steps cause each stair to writhe under his tramp at five each morning, the empty bottles left over from the night before are described as sepulchral, when she makes the bed, the speaker is jeered by minor demons.

The introduction of the husband/lover into the poem is quite jarring. His introduction is not treated as a loving or even pleasant one. It is almost as if he is just a piece, a picture in her studio apartment. The speaker does not spend time describing him which makes her love for him seem distant and cold. He is associated with negative things like 'bread' and 'cigarettes'. He leaves her in the house alone to buy cigarettes which further perpetuates the image of indifference. To him, cigarettes are more important than addressing his mate's happiness. The picture-perfect piano that the speaker describes in the beginning of the poem is declared out of tune by him. This illustrates that the picture-perfect love and expectations that she had of him are also not what they should be. Here, Kate Millet's concept of sexual politics in her famous work *The Sexual Politics* (1970) is relevant to the subtle imbalance in Rich's poem under study. Rich does not portray the male lover as openly tyrannical; nevertheless, the poem suggests a

disparity in emotional and domestic responsibility (Millet 23).

As evening approaches, the speaker finds that she has revived some of the love for the man. She need not worry about the daily household chores when night falls. This is the time that they spend together alone, in a state of mind that is separate from daily chores and duties. It is when daylight comes through the window like a relentless milkman up the stairs, is when reality starts to sink in again. She realizes that she cannot stay in bed forever with her lover; she will eventually have to get up and tend to her household duties just like the day before.

VII CONCLUSION

Adrienne Rich's poem "Living in Sin" explores the conflict betwixt 'romantic idealism' and the 'ordinary' realities of domestic life. Through dissimilitude-rich set of imagery of beauty and disorder, Rich gradually dismantles the speaker's idealised expectations. The 'neglected studio', the 'out of tune' piano and the recurring signs of domestic routine, all of them reveal the gap that exists betwixt the drama of love and its lived experience. Ultimately, the poem presents 'love' neither wholly fulfilling not entirely absent. Instead, Rich portrays relationships as complex spaces wherein desire, affection, disappointment and, routine co-exist. Her free-verse form as well as shifting imagery - reinforce the speaker's unsettled consciousness. Thus, "Living in Sin" becomes a critique of 'romantic fantasy' and an exploration of women's 'lived' realities, thereby, suggesting that everyday life, inevitably, compels idealised dreams of love to confront the reality.

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