

WOMEN'S QUEST FOR THE INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY LOST IN THE COLLECTIVE ONE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The political and economic turmoil of the modern life influenced everyone, particularly marginalized groups, such as people of the *other* race, ethnicity, social class, gender or sexual orientation. This concept of *otherness* refers to not belonging to the main stream and it is one of the most important motifs in contemporary literature. This paper deals with the concept of women as the other focusing on the poetry of two great contemporary American poets, Adrienne Rich and Joy Harjo. We will establish some differences and then again, some similarities between the above-mentioned poets as they belong to different races and sexual orientations, but still the fact that they are both women implies that they also have something in common. What is in common for these two poets is dealing with the position of women in contemporary American society and searching for the individual identity lost in the collective one. Furthermore, they tend to be representatives of marginalized groups, but yet they struggle to liberate themselves from that labeling and try to be main stream. Consequently, they have to work *against the grain*. We will perform the analysis from the feminist critique viewpoint with a special emphasis on the concept of *otherness*, *lost identity* and *body image*.

Keywords: Adrienne Rich, Joy Harjo, feminism, otherness, lost identity, body image.

INTRODUCTION

The social and economic turmoil of the twentieth century caused by the Vietnam war, which followed after the period of national prosperity and development in all fields, influenced everyone in the contemporary American society, particularly marginalized groups, such as people of the *other* race, ethnicity, social class, gender or sexual orientation. Therefore, this label of being *the other*, which refers to not belonging to the mainstream, represents the fundamental issue when the marginalized groups are concerned and it is one of the most important motifs in contemporary literature. It implies that the concept of *otherness* can be analyzed from different literary critique viewpoints, such as post-colonial analysis, imagology as a branch of comparative literature, feminist analysis, gender and queer analysis, etc. In other words, we can deal with otherness whenever we are faced with some stereotypes which have real social effects. However, in this paper we will focus on the feminist critique viewpoint.

This paper deals with the concept of women as *the other* focusing on the poetry of two great contemporary American poets, Adrienne Rich and Joy Harjo. We will establish some differences and then again the focus will be more on some similarities between the above-mentioned poets as they belong to different races and sexual orientations, but still the fact that they are both women implies that they also have something in common. What is in common for these two poets is dealing with the inferior position of women in the contemporary American society and searching for the individual identity lost in the collective one. Furthermore, they tend to be representatives of marginalized groups, yet they struggle to liberate themselves from that labelling and try to be mainstream. Consequently, they have to work *against the grain*. We will perform the analysis from the feminist critique viewpoint with a special emphasis on the concept of *otherness*, *lost identity*, *objectification of women*, *body image* and transformation.

Feminist critical theories

As we have already mentioned, our analysis will be based on feminist theories with a special emphasis on the concept of *otherness*, *lost identity*, *objectification of women* and *body image*. The variables included in our analysis would be the *other* race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation as they are known to have a great impact on feminist identification and body satisfaction. In our analysis we will also refer to the objectification theory according to which women are expected to view themselves as an outside male observer would see them. Therefore, women's perception of their body and existence in general is determined by their constant self-evaluation which leads to losing their true identity. When the notion of objectification within feminist theory is concerned, it implies seeing and/or treating a woman as an object and the focus is frequently on sexual objectification.

When it comes to feminist critical theory, it is important to emphasize that it is not based on a uniform approach; on the contrary, it is a diverse and ever-changing field. In fact, over the past years, feminist critical theory has been “based on a series of creative oppositions, of critiques and counter-critiques, and is constantly and innovatively in flux – challenging, subverting and expanding not only other (male) theories but its own positions and agenda.” (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005). Among other things, some feminists point out certain essential and fundamental similarities between women and men, whereas the others emphasize their different needs and interests. On the other hand, there are also those who draw on both perspectives (Hall, 2001).

Generally speaking, women's fight for their rights and equality has come as a result of patriarchy being asserted over matriarchy throughout much of history. In other words, although the word *feminism* has come into usage in the 1890s, it has its roots much further back and its main purpose has always been “to disturb the complacent certainties of such a patriarchal culture, to assert a belief in sexual equality, and to eradicate sexist domination in transforming society.” (Selden, et al., 2005). The most important representatives of feminism are Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susana Gubar, respectively.

Virginia Woolf, who wrote two essential texts on raising awareness of women's lower position in the society, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), “thought women wrote differently not because they were different psychologically from men but because their social positioning was different.” (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 2005, p. 119). As women did not have the right to vote or to decide on any other important subjects, the only way to express their opinion back then was through their writing. However, there was another problem women writers had to face with and that was the anxiety of authorship. It is well known that some of the most talented English writers used a male pseudonym to publish their work and one of them is George Eliot, whose real name was Mary Ann Evans (Lešić, Kapidžić-Osmanagić, Katnić-Bakaršić, & Kulenović, 2006).

According to Elaine Showalter, the women's literature went through three phases: *feminine phase* (1840–80), *feminist phase* (1880–1920) and *female phase* (1920 onwards). In the first phase women writers imitated and internalized the dominant male aesthetic standards (writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot). The second phase included protesting against male values and advocating separatist utopias and suffragette sisterhoods (radical feminist writers such as Elizabeth Robins and Olive Schreiner). In the third phase the focus was specifically on female writing and female experience meaning that it was a phase of self-discovery (some of the female writers being Rebecca West, Katherine Mansfield and Dorothy Richardson). (Selden et al., 2005)

Adrienne Rich and Joy Harjo's poetry

As we have already pointed out, there are many essential differences between these two very influential American poets, Adrienne Rich and Joy Harjo. While Rich was a white, homosexual woman with Jewish origins, Harjo was a Native-American woman, but then again it means that both of them had to be engaged in the struggle for their position in the world of white men. Their poetry is always engaged and that can be also seen in their main topics. In her poems Rich mostly deals with marital and patriarchal suppression of women by men and as a result a recurring theme in her poetry is “the conflict and dismay endured by artistically inclined and intellectual women in

a society that undervalues female role” (Penda, 2009). Therewithal her main themes “range from the victims of a concentration camp to a woman beaten by her husband in a trailer to two lesbians brutally attacked while vacationing” (Riggs, 2001). On the other hand, Harjo tells the story of her ancestors and the main themes in her poems are the struggle of American Indians, being nature-oriented, the importance of belonging to somewhere and the relationship among everything that exists (Kimmelman, 2005). When it comes to their mutual topic, it is searching for the individual identity and finding a way to survive in a world which is more inclined to men than to women.

Otherness and lost identity

When otherness and identity are concerned, it should be noted that those two concepts are inseparable as the *other* only exists relative to the *self*, and vice versa. Searching for an identity which gives meaning to one’s existence is something what is in common for all individuals and societies labelled to be the *other*. Therefore, this also applies for women, regardless of their colour, sexual orientation, etc. It is also important to emphasize that the quality of being the other wouldn’t be an issue of this paper if it were a quality implying that women are just somewhat different from men, but still equal to them. On the contrary, it implies that women are inferior to men.

In these terms, Rich and Harjo approach some very significant questions. How can a woman survive in a men’s world? What can be changed when it comes to the social expectations within which *she* should comply with her role of being the *other*?

According to both poets the answer lies deep in our past and it is on us to explore it in order to recuperate our lost identity. One of the poems which is concerned with this topic is Rich’s *Diving into the Wreck* (Penda, 2009) in which we have a sea diver as a metaphor for a woman on her quest for the lost identity. Moreover, “the sea symbolizes the mind of the creative woman, and the “wreck” is its all-but-destroyed potential, which the explorer must discover and reclaim.” (Kimmelman, 2005). Rich says that “the sea is not a question of power” and then she concludes “I am she: I am he” redirecting us back to the time when there were no oppositions of male and female, subject and object or powerful and feeble ones. It is here at this point in time that some changes can be initiated. However, “[b]ecause the poet seeks a truth that runs contrary to social norms, the quest on which she embarks is a dangerous one” (Kimmelman, 2005). She is alone on her journey and it is obvious that she is afraid of the unfamiliar world of the sea even though she wears some protective equipment.

In her poem *Remember* (Penda, 2009) Harjo, who is “known for a style that juxtaposes the present, past, and future” (Kimmelman, 2005), emphasizes the power of remembering when it comes to every being’s existence and survival issues. In other words, once again the answer lies deep in our past and all we should do is remember that we all come from and belong to the same place, the Earth, regardless of the colour of our skin or our gender. As in most of her poems she shows her strong identification with her Native-American roots and her oneness with the nature, Remember the earth whose skin you are:

red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth.

Moreover, in her poem *Anchorage* (Penda, 2009) Harjo warns us how powerful the nature is and how we all, both women and men, once were, still are and always will be feeble when faced with its powers:

Once a storm of boiling earth cracked open
the streets, threw open the town.
It’s quiet now, but underneath the concrete
is the cooking earth

In this poem she also poignantly wonders “who would believe/ the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival/ those who were never meant/ to survive”, referring primarily to her people, but then also to every other community labelled to be *the other* and doomed to extinct. The point is that they did survive regardless of all the obstacles.

Objectification of women

Objectification refers to the lowering of a person to the status of an object and when women are concerned, it mostly implies treating them based on their physical appearance and their role in the house, what is precisely what happens to the women in Rich's and Harjo's poetry. As they live in patriarchal cultures, those women often occupy the position of an *object* meaning that they are expected to be silent observers in a male-dominated world when faced with some crucial situations. We can see that in Harjo's poem *When the World as We Knew It Ended* (Harjo, 2002), in which faced with the war issues those women just "saw it from the kitchen window over the sink" and "saw it all, as [they] changed diapers and fed the babies." The image of women just doing their everyday chores, despite the fact that the outside world is upside down and that they are aware of it, illustrates vividly to which extent a woman was deprived from her basic human rights, i.e. the chance to speak out.

Another similar situation can be seen in Rich's poem *Frame* (Penda, 2009). In this poem we can see the image of a young, black woman deprived of basic human rights by white men and what makes it even worse is that we can also see the image of a white woman, being the poet herself, who has to pretend that she hasn't seen this act of sexual oppression and discrimination as she is a woman and she doesn't have any rights to raise her voice. She emphasizes that it "is told by a white woman who they will say was never there. I say I am there". These two images clearly point out that the objectification implies both the obvious physical or sexual abuse of women and the less obvious, but still crucially important psychological abuse and oppression.

The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window (Penda, 2009) is Harjo's poem in which the body of a woman is a central image and although we find out the names of her family members, *she* remains nameless because her name is irrelevant as she is a representative of any other woman in the same position. This poem is filled with the images of her powerless and destroyed body, such as, her "belly is soft from / her children's births", "she is dangling" and "her teeth break off at the edges", but the point is that in these images an outside (male)observer would see just a typical woman and no reason to be worried about.

Engagement and transformation

As we have seen in the analysis we have done so far, there are more essential similarities than differences between the above-mentioned poets or at least we have focused on the aspects they have in common. We have also seen that their poetry is always engaged meaning that it usually addresses some important political issues, but there is also one crucial question arising therein. Do we talk about covert or overt engagement of their poetry? Then again, are there any similarities in their political standing and attitudes?

First of all, both poets have the same objective and that is to raise people's awareness of what can be done to make a change in women's inferior position in the society. What we argue here is that they both also address these issues covertly as they depict their women usually alone on their journey, but at some point at the end of the poems they make them realise they are alone after all. These women may be physically alone on their quest, but still they belong to a wider community of the women in the same position. However, in the most of the poems we encounter non-closure as another distinctive characteristic in modern and contemporary poetry which helps the poet keep the reader's attention and engagement after he/she finishes the reading.

The main character of Adrienne Rich's poem *Diving into the Wreck* (Penda, 2009) at first seems to be in a risky position as she is alone on her quest, but at the end of the poem the speaker talks directly to a second person:

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to the scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths

in which
our names do not appear

By shifting from the first-person perspective into the second-person one, the poet includes the readers/women in the process of transformation in order to incite them to deal with the feminist issues and to call them to political action. Thus, these women can realize that they are not alone in this process of transformation and this could be the first step towards political activism and eventually it can yield a change. Rich's objective is to question and make us question the truth of received history as it is always told by the more powerful ones. Perhaps there are some untold stories which could make a change in women's lower position in the society. It is obvious that Rich really believes in the power of literature to make this change and this poem "as a whole points to the faith she has in her own literary efforts to correct our mistaken perceptions about ourselves and the flaws in our social systems." (Kimmelman, 2005). Though this "new knowledge the diver discovers will be put to use in altering the cultural "scene" to which she returns at the end of the poem", this poem like many other Rich's poems "focuses more on observation and revelation than on recommending specific political action." (Kimmelman, 2005).

Rich's poem *Diving into the Wreck* can be compared to Harjo's poem *The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window* (Penda, 2009) in order to point out their common attitude. In this poem Harjo provides us with an image of a Native-American suicidal woman who also feels torn between being alone and then again not completely alone in her trouble. In the course of that cyclic quest first she thinks about her children, husband and parents and above all, "She sees other/women hanging from many-floored windows" which means that she knows she shares the same fate or doom with them. Then again, she becomes aware that she must fight this battle on her own:

But she is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window,
and she knows she is hanging by her own fingers, her
own skin, her own thread of indecision

Once again, there is no closure at the end of the poem as she remains indecisive and helpless as her choice is to stay a loving and self-sacrificing mother and wife or to commit a suicide.

She thinks she remembers listening to her own life
break loose, as she falls from the 13th floor
window on the east side of Chicago, or as she
climbs back up to claim herself again.

The third potential choice is in sight when the poet says "She would speak", but she doesn't and the only hope which remains is her awareness of belonging to a wider community of women who feel the same and that awareness could be the first step towards a change.

As Harjo's origins make her fond of oral traditions, she often chooses to write her poems in third person, which is also the case in this poem, and this creates the effects of storytelling as a form of raising people's awareness of some social issues covertly.

In Harjo's poem *We must call a meeting* (Penda, 2009) we can see once again how skilfully and inextricably Harjo intertwines nature and humanity and "puts emphasis on the interrelatedness of all things and people, which is common to Native American storytelling." (Penda, 2009) At the end of the poem the poet requires the reader's engagement by her call for help:

I am lost; I am looking for you
who can help me walk this thin line between the breathing
and the dead.

In her poem *Sources* (1986) Rich "raises key questions about identity, choices, and helplessness" (Riggs, 2001) and she also admits that writing the engaged poetry is her responsibility in her opinion:

With whom do you believe your lot is cast?
From where does your strength come?
I think somehow, somewhere

every poem of mine must raise those questions

There is another issue which these poets have in common and that is the accumulated anguish and hatred they feel towards (white) men, as well as the way in which they both deal with this issue despite the fact that their final objectives and achievements are somewhat different. Rich's objective is to liberate herself from an unhappy marriage and to reach her true identity which turns out to be homosexual. At the same time she wants to share her experience of liberation with the other women in the same position and incite them to fight for themselves. On the other hand, Harjo's objective is to raise people's awareness of what her people and she herself have endured and it is her contribution to their liberation, particularly women's liberation, from the labelling of being the other. We argue that they both managed to do so.

The Phenomenology of Anger (Rich, 1973) is Rich's poem in which she admits her anguish and hatred towards men as she addresses *him* by words "I hate you/ I hate the mask you wear, your eyes" and then she continues, "The only real love I have ever felt / was for children and other women." However, we can conclude that this hatred and anger can also be a source of transformation and vision of liberation as she embarks on her quest of self-questioning and revelation:

Last night, in this room, weeping
I asked you: *what are you feeling?*
do you feel anything?
Now in the torsion of your body
As you defoliate the fields we lived from
I have your answer

In her prose poem *Transformations* (1990) Harjo argues:

This poem is a letter to tell you that I have smelled the hatred you have tried to find me with. [...] This poem could be a bear treading the far northern tundra, smelling the air for sweet alive meat. Or a piece of seaweed stumbling in the sea. Or a blackbird laughing. What I mean is that hatred can be turned into something else if you have the right words, the right meanings, buried in that tender place in your heart where the most precious animals live.

First of all, the plural form of the word in the title indicates the possibility of different forms of transformation in this case. Harjo sees the hatred as a dark and beautiful woman, who she encounters both in a nightmare and in the realm of miracles. In other words, we should be careful so we do not end up consumed by hatred. Instead, we should see in it an initiating point of our empowerment and revelation.

When it comes to their personal transformation, we can argue that both poets first tried to imitate the patriarchal form in order to be accepted in a male-dominated world, but in that process of transformation they managed to reach their female voices, but this topic can be a subject of a new paper as it requires some further discussion. As we can see, transformation is always possible and desirable both at the individual and communal levels if there are some issues to be solved.

Although they are representatives of marginalized groups, these poets tend to liberate themselves from that labelling and therefore, they undergo a process of transformation as they try to become mainstream. Consequently, they have to work *against the grain*.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to compare and contrast the engaged poetry of two great contemporary American poets, Adrienne Rich and Joy Harjo to better understand the relationship between individual identity, objectification, body image and transformation. The conclusion can be drawn that even though there are many differences between them, their individual struggles for women's rights become their most important mutual aspect as an attempt to raise people's awareness of what can be done to make a change in women's inferior position in the society. In other words, from the feminist critique point of view they are not much different. They both tell us the story of the *loss* and regaining of *identity*.

All in all, our findings suggest that both poets think that if we want to have a chance for women's liberation and recuperation of their lost identity, we must explore our past and go back to the roots when there were no divisions, prejudices or discrimination. On one hand, both poets are aware of their helplessness when faced with the labelling of being the *other* and the objects expected to accept silently their fate as they live in the world in which the man is thought to be the *one*. "Woman is riveted into a lop-sided relationship with man: he is the 'One', she the 'Other'." (Selden, et al., 2005). It is obvious that this objectification of women deprive *her* from her basic human rights, i.e. the chance to speak out and provide us with the images of her powerless and destroyed body. On the other hand, these poets prove that there is a way out if we undergo a process of thorough transformation which is precisely what they and their characters do. This transformation starts by the fact that they become aware that they are not alone and that they belong to a wider community of women with the same issues.

Having considered all of these aspects, the conclusion can be drawn that both these poets address the issues of women's inferior position in the society covertly, but thoroughly. Despite the fact that their social background, final objectives and achievements are somewhat different, we argue that they both manage to realise those objectives.

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