
Abjection of Power

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Adrienne Rich, one of the greatest poets of the modernistic time, epitomizes the abjection adequately in her poem “Power,” dedicated to the honor of Mary Curie. Mary Curie was a well-known physicist and chemist who conducted pioneering research on radioactivity at the beginning of the 20th century. Although she was awarded the Nobel prize twice for her great sacrifices, she was deprived of her health for the sake of science. She died from aplastic anemia from exposure to radiation during her scientific research and her radiological work at the field hospitals during World War 1. Although the poem deals with various themes, I think the power of abjection plays the most significant role. According to Julia Kristeva in the *Powers of Horror*, the abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between the subject and object or between the self and other. The poem “Power” fits into the concept of abjection in terms of its form, the ideology, the symbols, and going against social norms. Rich puts Mary Curie in the in-betweenness; she is neither the subject nor the object. By doing so, she wants to empower woman scientist and call upon women to strengthen women's solidarity. Especially during the transformative time of the second wave of feminism, Rich aspired other women to be aware of other women's heroes and thus believe in their strength. Therefore, this paper will make efforts to analyze the poem “Power” from Kristeva’s abjection perspective and will conclude how important this poem is.

The pivotal part of analyzing the poem is its unconventional structure and powerful form of stanzas. As Adrienne Rich defined, poetry “is above all a concentration of the power of language, which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe”(219), and writing a poem about a scientist woman was out of exigency because of the demand to show poetry which “can come only from the poet’s need to identify her relationship to atrocities and injustice, the sources of her pain, fear and anger, the meaning of her resistance”(222). Her voice in this poem is “meditative and homiletic, rising to a moral pitch” (Carruthers 297) which troubles the readers but also soothes them to hear a similar and traditional voice. The poem consists of 4 stanzas, each having varying lines and no specific rhyme scheme that can define the intention and poet’s psychological condition while writing this poem. The poem has an atypical meter for modern literature, with most feet being iambic meter with some trochaic variations here and there. There are intentional pauses between the words, which can make the readers uncomfortable reading the poem smoothly, but the poet aims to bring readers' scrutiny to the most crucial lines of the poem. The first stanza has one line, while the second and the third stanzas consist of the longest four and eight stanzas, which can

be deciphered as the importance of those lines. And we can conclude that the third stanza can define the most crucial part for a perfect description of Mary Curie's life. The last stanza also contains four stanzas and ends the pain of both poet and scientist. What is thought-provoking here is that the poet does not use any punctuation marks except at the very end of the poem and keeps using enjambment from line to line. This method makes readers read without posing, contemplating steadily what the poet wants to convey, and finishing with a complete stop at the end. To conclude, the poem's structure is a type of abjection as it rejects the socially accepted norms for modernistic poems, which simultaneously grabs the readers' attention wildly.

The notion of power is not limited to being a woman; it also means swimming against the flow and breaking social norms. "Women together and in themselves have a power which is transformative," says Carruthers by including the urgency to "recover their power women need to move psychically and through metaphor to a place beyond the well-traveled routes of patriarchy and its institutions, especially its linguistic and rhetorical ones" (294) and Rich transfers the readers from oblivion to omniscient position. By reading a poem about a scientist woman, we unconsciously juxtapose Mary Curie and Adrienne Rich and analyze their influence as women in their patriarchal realms. Both were crucial figures of the 19th-century who brought changes in the way things worked. Writing poems also empowers the poetess, "for her, being a woman and a poet brings into conflict the states of power and powerlessness, forcing new definitions of power, new possibilities for women, and profound repercussions for society." (Keyes 4). Since being a poet brings the power of creating new forms and the ability to affect others through raising awareness and making an outbreak against the social authority. Therefore, reading Rich's poems might give abjection to some misogynistic people and cause abjection. Although her poems are beautifully written and talk authentically about issues women face in society, many male readers disapproved of her writing style, which did not stop her.

The second critical part of the poem that requires meticulous thorough internalization is the symbols the poet puts on the display. Carruthers entitles motifs and metaphors as frequent in Lesbian poetry because "they bespeak the recovery of a self that is deeply buried, unwritten, but recoverable as the poet, aided by a series of images embodying her muse, remembers herself in selves" (296). The initial sign is the earth that defines life and death for the speaker. Though many might think of dark and gloomy images of the ground, it is traditionally referred to as the "mother earth" or life-giving source to human beings. The generative capability of women had also been treated similarly to the earth. It was considered shameful or sinful to talk about women's fertile bodies or their needs and wants. Still, like earth, actual values remain hidden under the surface "[l]iving in the earth-deposits of our history" (1). And Rich unearths one of the most crucial historical figures like a "backhoe." This history becomes an inspiration for both the poet and the scientist, referring to their exact point in life, but the latter has sacrificed her life for this inspiration. Thus, the former becomes encouraged by her bravery. Once used for curing sicknesses, amber is also symbolic of how Mary Curie's sad story helps the poet go through her life's "winter seasons" and heal her wound as amber does. The third stanza is pathetic and heart-wrenching, making readers feel appalled, but it is the same feeling that makes others lifted by Mary's fearlessness. The word "flank" in the poem's second stanza can also be translated as

an essential feature for the continuity of life (woman's waist). Traditionally the word "flank" has been used to represent a women's waist, and Rich deliberately says "out of a crumbling flank of earth" (2) to give readers vivid images of Mary's decaying body and others' obligation to appreciate her work.

The more power one has, the more challenging it might become, and the same happened to Mary Curie, who objected to the social norms created by male-oriented communities. As Kristeva describes how the "abject does not cease challenging its master" (2), the same power of Mary Curie is a type of abjection as it is both destructive and constructive. The in-betweenness of this power places Mary Curie in the position of liminal space. She is presented with two choices: the destruction of her body and the construction of new experiments using that body. No matter how aggressive this dilemma is, it cannot stop her from "denying her wounds" (14-15) and choosing power over incapability. Abjection does not avoid pain or what causes the pain but rather "acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" because "abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives" (Kristeva 9-10). When one thinks about "wounds," one usually can recall abominable images we do not want to look at. Alike, Mary was revolted by her body's changes and health deterioration. But the same mental and physical wounds gave her the power the men have. Her ability to deny her injuries became the abject "magnetized pole of covetousness" (Kristeva 8). Mary desired to show the world her capabilities and prove that she was not just a mere wife who helped her husband win a Nobel prize, but she alone could do such magnificent things. Strikingly, we can uncover the abjection at the core within this sacrifice. Given sacrifice from an individual and common perspective, this sacrifice harms the scientist but dramatically benefits the society itself. (By denying her wounds, motherly body, she achieved her subjectivity).

Last but not least, gender issues can be the most bottom-line topic of abjection. "Although there is a significant patriarchal tradition of identifying women's bodies as a technology for reproduction, in Rich's poems, women's bodies are technologies for communication and scientific work." (Audrey, 46). Considering Mary Cury's status at that time, her inferior gender, and her interests in a man-dominated sphere, it is no secret that she was from a minority group that people did not want to read, hear, or even see the pain and struggles she went through. According to Kristeva, "the abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being" (5). According to Audrey, there is a "strong attraction to a more organic world at the same time that women constantly manipulate a variety of technologies for their own purposes and in their own ways." (49). This tension turns into another abjection which puts Mary Curie in crisis or "winters of this climate" (5, Rich). Still, it cannot stop her from proving her worth, willingness, and heroism. Because this exact abjection brings her power by which she can acquire joy. "One does not know it; one does not desire it; one joys in it. Violently and painfully. A passion" (Kristeva 9). Mary was in pain, but her passion for her career overcame all the terrible pain, and she succeeded.

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