

Hope In Chaos: Adrienne Rich's "The School Among The Ruins"

Dr. Anne Angeline Abraham

Associate Professor, Bishop Moore College
Mavelikara, Kerala

Abstract: Adrienne Rich, the celebrated American poet is a force to be reckoned with. With more than twenty volumes of poetry and five books of prose to her credit, she is considered to be one of the leading feminists of the world. At the beginning of the twenty first century, she writes her poetry with a strength that marks her position as a radical, lesbian feminist and political activist.

In the new century, Rich writes poetry which confronts the circumstances where war and terrorism create chaos and confusion. She applauds the bravery of the people who live on, even in the midst of these adverse situations, hoping for a better future. She recognizes the turmoil faced by the ordinary people – people whose lives have been turned upside down due to various political conditions in the country.

*This paper traces her convictions and hope in the art of poetry through a reading of a few poems of her volume titled *The School Among the Ruins* (2004). In this volume of poems, she vividly describes the chaotic situations and the terror faced by people and children in the midst of terrorist violence and disorder. She insists that language is a powerful medium to voice her opinions and she uses her poems for this purpose. She dwells upon the impact of public decisions and interventions in the form of war and other calamities which disrupt the lives of innocent victims and she holds everyone concerned accountable for this upheaval and unrest. But she inspires her readers to hope for a better future even in the most deplorable conditions.*

Keywords: Chaos, War, Hope, Art, Language

I. INTRODUCTION

With more than twenty volumes of poetry and five outstanding books of prose to her credit, Adrienne Rich is hailed as one of the leading poets of contemporary America. Her identity as a radical, lesbian feminist poet has gained her popularity. Her growth as a poet of renown is evident in her poetry. Her collection of poems, *The School Among the Ruins* (2004), depicts the unrest and egoistic generation of Americans who are confounded by their unpredictable present, interspersed with war and terrorism and its aftermath in the unseen future. But it is to her credit that she finds hope in the midst of adversity.

The title of the volume, *The School Among the Ruins* (2004) points to the dislocations caused due to unexpected situations. In most of the poems, Rich talks about the individual sorrow that each faces, amid all the political unrest. "To be bruised: in the soft organs skeins of consciousness" (25) in the

poem, "Equinox", explains the wounds that affected her innermost being. She tries to reason out what one actually longs for and she maintains that she is "at war with words" as these words can either bring in peace or bring about war.

In "The School Among The Ruins", the poet teaches children to hope and go on living though all outward situations point otherwise. The subtitle of the poem, "Beirut. Baghdad. Sarajevo. Bethlehem. Kabul. Not of course here" highlights the different places around the world where terror exists and stresses on the civil agonies these people have to face. This poem aims to capture all the events which have caused havoc and infused terror in the lives of ordinary folks. She highlights the tense situation and the impact of public crisis over individual lives. She dwells on the importance of hope that children ought to learn in this 'school of ruins'. Even in the face of crisis, hope is highlighted. In the 'school' among the 'ruins', there is something to learn and to hope for. She hopes for a better tomorrow and to strive for it in spite of the

negative, desperate situations. She insists that triumph occurs when there is hope for the future despite present depressing situations. The poem, with its seven sections, beautifully describes the situation in a school where an ordinary day is disrupted by violence. The first section describes a normal busy day for the teachers and students of the school. But in the second section, the whole scenario is changed. The situation is tense and is described aptly by the poet:

rooms from the upper city
tumble cratering lower streets
cornices of olden ornament human debris
when fear vacuums out the streets
When the whole town flinches
blood on the undersole thickening to glass. (20-25)

These words highlight the unrest seen around. Unexpected violence drastically changes the normal lives of innocent, unsuspecting people. The ordinary routine of the school is disrupted and the children cannot leave the school as usual:

School's now in session day and night
children sleep
in the classrooms teachers rolled close. (28-30)

The changed situation of the classroom continues in all the sections. The last five sections deal with the brave methods in which teachers handle the terror stricken children and try to calm them in the midst of forced calamity. Teachers and students are trapped inside a school building. They cannot leave the building, nor do they have sufficient food or any other means to sustain them. The attackers have forced them to be inside the school building. The children are forced to learn survival in the midst of utter hopelessness. The grim situation of not having fresh food to eat, of children asking for their mothers, of answering questions of why all this is happening are overwhelming. The readers empathize with the suffering children along with the poet. Empathy for the sufferers as well as anger is felt at the gruesome situation created by the creators of violence. The captives try to identify their situation with a hungry stray cat which is seen hunting for food, and try to save and eat what leftovers they have. The captives also try to sleep in the tents while fighter planes shriek overhead. They point to the wild cat and learn its ways of surviving in the wild: "She'll teach us Let's call her / Sister" (67-68). Hope is given in a situation where there is little hope. Hope in the midst of ruin, hope for a better tomorrow, "when we get milk we'll give her some" (69).

The situation where the teacher teaches the children 'responsibility' and the students eat 'fresh' food is reversed completely when terror strikes. The lessons change and food is scarce, but they learn to live during this crisis:

A morning breaks without bread or fresh-poured milk
parents or lesson plans
diarrhea first question of the day
children shivering it's September
Second question: where is my mother?
One: I don't know where your mother
Is Two: I don't know
why they are trying to hurt us
Three: or the latitude and longitude
of their hatred Four: I don't know if we
hate them as much I think there's more toilet paper

in the supply closet I'm going to break it open. (38-49)

The lesson taught is undying hope even in the midst of extreme devastating circumstances. The grim reality of the situation is looked into, the unknown details acknowledged truthfully but at the same time assuring that their school haven is safe since it is their own territory. The poet continues:

Today this is your lesson:
write as clearly as you can
your name home street and number
down on this page
No you can't go home yet
but you aren't lost
this is our school
I'm not sure what we'll eat
we'll look for healthy roots and greens
searching for water though the pipes are broken. (50-59)

The terror and confusion that the trapped children confront is aptly described by Rich. The courageous teacher, in a terror stricken, war filled city, tells her students to be hopeful and not to give up. The teachers desperately try to pacify the terrified students. The readers empathize with the trapped, innocent people whose daily, routine life is disrupted and turned upside down by the unfeeling terrorists. They also applaud the courage and determination of the victims in the terrifying situation.

The poem ends with the captives trying to adjust to the adverse situation. They try to distract themselves with stories and songs even while they have to wipe off human debris from their bodies. But they learn to adjust and continue to hope that the current situation will change. Precise words by the poet in the last two stanzas sum up the tense atmosphere:

I've told you, let's try to sleep in this funny camp
All night pitiless pilotless things go shrieking
above us to somewhere

...

"We sang them to naps told stories made
shadow- animals with our hands
wiped human debris off boots and coats
sat learning by heart the names
some were too young to write
some had forgotten how". (70-72, 77-82)

The traumatic situation continues and it has a lasting impression in their terror-filled lives. The situation is tense and the emotions are high and this is precisely what Rich intends to convey through her poem. But she also assures them through the actions and words of the teachers that they can overcome the situation. The situation is the same but the people have learnt to cope. They are filled with fear but they have to go on living and they do it to the best of their ability. They hope that in the near future, the atmosphere would change for the better. This is the lesson of hope that they learn in this 'school' among the 'ruins'. Hope amidst hopelessness and survival amidst utter desolation are the two important lessons learnt in this 'school' among the 'ruins'.

Political circumstances disrupt individual lives immensely. Innocent people have to suffer for no fault of their own but there is still hope in the midst of disillusionment. This lesson is quite important in the twenty first century. Dislocations and disruptions are inevitable in this century but the spirit of boldly prevailing in the midst of destruction and

despair is worth practicing. While Rich expresses her concern over the adverse political and social unrest her fellow citizens face, she recounts in the title poem how these situations affect ordinary lives of individuals. She empathizes with the individuals and tries to give them the great lesson of hope in the midst of adversity.

"USonian Journals 2000" talks about the situation in the United States of North America where things change rapidly due to different political situations. Usonian, as explained by the poet herself, is a term used by the American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright for his prairie inspired architecture. This poem deftly portrays the North American dystopia, social alienation, self absorption and technology driven individuals who disrupt the social order of the day. Change is inevitable and Rich feels that she is dislocated in her own country. She writes:

A country I was born and lived in undergoes rapid and flagrant change. I return here as a stranger. In fact I've lived here all along. At a certain point I realized I was no longer connected along any continuous strand to the nature of the change. (1-4)

She recalls an incident where an explosion disrupts the normal life of unassuming people. A shooting incident upturns an ordinary day. The intensity of the chaotic moment is described in these lines:

Something happened then everything. A man's voice screamed, then whined: a police siren starting up seemed miles away but then right there. I didn't see any blood. We ran in different directions, she toward, I away from, the police. (17-21)

She feels that at the moment of panic, most people think only of themselves and are indifferent to what is happening around them so long as they are not affected by it. Rich goes on to talk about the dislocations that voices can bring in this busy world. Modern amenities tend to let people be selfish and self-centered. She quotes a few examples. People talk aloud using their cell phones, disrupting the people around them and not caring about it either. "Private urgencies made public, not collective, speaker within a bubble"(61-62) is what Rich says of this habit of talking aloud on the cell phone irrespective of whether other people are disturbed or not. This is what Rich calls the 'USonian speech'. Rich concludes the section by referring to the value of language. She explains that language has the power to bind and to dissociate, to exclude the speechless, to nourish self deception and has the capacity for rebirth and subversion.

In the sixth section of the volume, the poet talks about the seven scenarios of dislocations. First, she tells about the dislocation of staying in the city, far away from home:

Still learning the word
"home" or what it could mean
say, to relinquish
...
You must go live in the city now
...
must endure the foreign music
of the block party
finger in useless anger
the dangling cords of the window blind. (1-3, 7, 10-13)

Restlessness and loneliness is evident in these lines. Dislocated from the warmth of home to new places in the city

are disheartening and one must endure it, rather than enjoy it. In the following section, Rich contrasts the dreadful places to the utopian places. In these places, "In a vast dystopic space the small things / multiply" (14-15) and one has to learn to live with the dislocations according to what one is capable of:

you grasp or share a clot of food
according to your nature
or your strength
love's ferocity snarls. (22-25)

Confusion and dislocations continue in the third section also which describe infections that affect all alike, in the city and the world, where all people are affected except the solipsist who is unconcerned about everything else. The government hospitals are places of dislocation where ex-warriors are treated in poverty-stricken atmospheres. Courageous warriors of yesterday are patients today – dislocated from their wartime splendor to poverty stricken pain and disorder. Defiance or disdain brings in dislocations too, in the fifth section of the poem. Revolution in love by stating what is on one's mind or defiance of any sort brings in punishments, leaving scars of a permanent nature. Innocence in love leads to the knowledge of reality with scars as reminders, a dislocation one has to live with, forever. But not starting over is a blunder and a dislocation which has no excuse. Compromising in times of failure is inexcusable.

The seventh and final section of the brilliant poem deals with the dislocation of returning home, after being wounded and finishing a lonesome journey, crossing three continents:

internationalist turning toward home
three continents to cross documents declarations
searches queues
and home no simple matter
of hearth or harbor
bleeding from internal wounds
he diagnosed physician
without frontiers. (86-93)

Boundaries don't matter to a wounded person as they are carried over with the person. Dislocations in any way can be heartrending and it has to be dealt with.

Rich gravely analyzes the Palestinian-Israel issue in the poem, "Transparencies". She expounds the values of the spoken word and tries to convey the tense situation faced by the people on both sides:

We are truly sorry for the mess we made
is merely routine word that would cancel deed
That human equals innocent and guilty
That we grasp for innocence whether or no
is elementary That words can translate into broken bones
That the power to hurl words is a weapon
That the body can be a weapon
any child on playground knows. (6-13)

The poet is distressed over the cruelties that people bring upon one another and she bewails the situation.

Titles of other poems in the volume like "Alternating Currents" and "Dislocations" point to the disruptions of the turbulent times. Amidst all this unrest, people live on, learning from shared experiences and keeping alive the memories of both the good and the bad times. Dislocations from the security of home and loved ones often cause discomfort and confusion. Poverty and war bring in dislocations too.

Courageous warriors of yesterday are wounded patients of today, dislocated from their wartime splendor to poverty stricken pain and disorder. Dislocations can be disheartening, but at times, changes bring consolation too. Change is inevitable and one needs to confront it courageously

Rich reaches towards the anguish felt by different nations and people and searches for an answer through her poetry in this collection. She collaborates with Israeli professor, Lois Bar- Yaacov and talks about the Arab Israeli conflict. She writes in the poem, "Collaborations", asking for a "poetry to embrace all this- not describe, embrace staggering/in its arms, Jacob- and -angel-wise?"(42-45) Thus, through all the upheavals and unrest at the beginning of the twenty first century Rich believes that art can be a 'school' of hope in the 'ruins' of the world of war, chaos and confusion. She affirms in 'Artworks (II)' of the "Usonian Journals 2000": "If art is our only resistance, what does that make us? If we're collaborators, what's our offering to corruption- an aesthetic, anaesthetic, dye of silence, withdrawal, intellectual disgust?" (10-14) Rich questions the individuals whose personal lives are on the collective lives of their country and the world at large. She holds language and art accountable for the various responses that are evoked.

Rich, through her latest volume of poems, applauds the courage of ordinary people in this twenty first century, who go on living in the midst of adverse situations. Disruptions in the circumstances do not eventually dislocate the daily lives of people who know the great lesson of hope. This is what keeps people going on in this twenty first century and their fortitude is acknowledged by the poet. Rich confronts the upheavals constantly occurring in this world of today and emerges strong as always, bringing her readers along with her through the path of hope and promise, encouraging them to move forward in life, irrespective of the disturbances.

REFERENCES

- [1] Rich, Adrienne. (2004). *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000-2004*. New York, NY: Norton.
- [2] Gray, Richard. (1990). *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*. New York, NY: Longman.
- [3] Sickles, Amy. (2005). *Adrienne Rich*. Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House Publishers.