APPENDIX - I

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH ADRIENNE RICH

[I met Adrienne Rich on 6th October, 2004 at the time of the releasing of her latest work “The School Among the Ruins” and the Poetry Round at Seton Hall University. Rich travels throughout the United States attending conferences, giving lectures, and reading her poetry to diverse audiences. As I was then an M.A. Literature student in Seton Hall University and working in association with the Research Department, I had the privilege to converse with Rich on a couple of occasions.

Over coffee, Rich and I spoke about many things: her diverse family background, her writing, the influences on her work, contemporary literature and criticism, the past and future of American literature, politics, the women’s movement, and the oppression of people of colour throughout the world. Our conversation was interrupted several times as students and Professors came over to our table to talk with her, but Rich never lost her train of thought or repeated herself, perhaps a result of the concentration she perfected as a teacher during her long acquaintance with students. Using her own experiences as text, she establishes an immediate rapport with participants, often pausing to ask, "Does this make sense to you?" and responding candidly to questions and comments. She struck me as a]
determined woman used to juggling conflicting demands on her time. Just as she resists being pigeonholed into any one category, Rich’s writing transcends boundaries of language and genre. There is no difference between the Rich of her writings and the woman I met that evening. In person, she is thoughtful and candid, her speech, like her writing, interspersed with her strong convictions. In the interview, which she sandwiched between conference commitments, she talked about her published works and the forthcoming projects.

Q. Since The School Among the Ruins has been published recently and you have read a couple of poems today, let's start with this one. The title poem, “The School Among the Ruins” and the direct hitting line, “children shivering it’s September” clearly allude to the disruptions caused by the war and attacks. Has it been written directly under the influence of the Sept 11 terrorists’ attack? Or is it an immediate response to the prevailing protest against the invasion of Iraq?

Ans. I have written poems even earlier with war backgrounds. Vietnam and Gulf wars get their reflections in The Dark Fields of the Republic and Your Native Land, Your Life. But this one assumes a lot of importance at this background. And New York is one of the cities that I loved, spending my life and teaching in
the Universities. And I know the schools in New York City and terrible it was for the little ones.

**Q.** The title of the book sounds similar to that of W.B. Yeats’ poem, “Among the School Children”. But you reversed the situation of classroom, from one of love and warmth to one that of hostility and anxiety. Do you indirectly disown the influence of Yeats at this phase of writing poems?

**Ans.** My early phase of writing, as I wrote in my essay, “Blood, Bread, and Poetry,” was influenced by major male writers of my time. And for cadence and lyrical quality of my poems, I am very much indebted to Yeats. But this is nothing of a kind of disowning; I was moved by the sense of indifference and animosity expressed by the bureaucracy. And it made me think that the schools where our little children go every morning are no more safe places.

**Q.** Do you see your work as having essentially changed in character or style since you began? How do you evaluate this change?

**Ans.** Change is inevitable; it’s the law of life. But the concerns that are reflected in the change remain the same; you know what I mean... *(she smiles)*
Q. Yes, I know; language was one of your major concerns in your writings. You have written a great deal about the issue of dead language, the oppressor’s language, the need to find a new language, dream of a common language. And this latest book *The School Among the Ruins* also speaks of “the known and unknown powers of language to bind and dissociate; the capacity to ostracize the speechless, to nourish self deception; the capacity for rebirth and subversion because of the history of torture against human speech” (43). Do you still have the same zeal to pursue the dream?

**Ans.** It’s true I have written a lot about language and language is one of my major concerns even today. I have come a long way from the inception of the notion of common language. As I read this evening from this book (shows the book, *The School Among the Ruins*) “There hangs a space between the man / and his words ... man in self-arrest / between word and act”. I feel that the margin of that space existed at one point of time but has come down to a great extent. Though there were movements like that, ultimately I never thought of conceiving a language outside the parameters of logic.

Q. Since I have a personal interest from my own research topic’s point of view, how do you perceive the power of language, I mean, the politics of language?
**Ans.** Language is immensely powerful, especially in the hands of the writers; it has its politics, it’s an undeniable fact. My experience from academia as well as the social front tells me that. Moreover, I never believed that writing about it would serve as a panacea for all the problems. But as a writer, ignoring it would do no justice to myself and society as well. Language is the common heritage of the humanity at large, handed over by generations. It should enrich and ennable one’s existence; rather than it being used for dehumanizing and victimizing. Everyone should be able to approach it freely in order to express oneself; man and woman; the marginalized and the elite, black and white … .

**Q.** In your prose writings, especially in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, you wrote profusely about patriarchy as an intimidating presence that inhibits this basic privilege or right. And you advocated a common language in order to ensure women and the marginalized this sense of justice. Was it an attempt to bring equality among them?

**Ans.** I envisioned a humanity in which everyone should have the means to have a meaningful existence. I still believe in what I wrote thirty years back, “only where there is language is there world.” So language should enable one to be what he / she / black / white/ etc. wants to become expressing oneself. Once
they are free liberated individuals, equality prevails there. But there are structures, institutions designed by the patriarchy that happen to be a part of history which deny the freedom to exist. I want everything possible for language. Otherwise, equality is always a comparative social construct. In that sense, equality was not my direct agenda.

Q. Is there, has there ever been a “revolutionary poetics” or is all that a matter of a few sleazy technical tricks? What is the relation of your work to this question, if there is a relation? Otherwise how do you respond to such a notion?

Ans. Poetry is an exploration of language. So whenever one explores the possibilities of language rejecting the conventional expectations of poetry, it necessarily becomes revolutionary. I want to write poems that are out there on the edge of meaning. It should communicate to the masses and ennoble their life. I find that modern society becomes more and more conscious of that, thus takes for granted more and more as not needing to be explained. I don’t believe that a single poem can do that.

Q. From the French side, writers like Kristeva, Irigaray wrote about equality and Lacan spoke of the similar liberation of the subjects in his Psycholinguistic theory. How far do you agree with the equality and liberation that they wrote about? Is your
dream of a common language aimed at the same goal? Or is it still a never realized dream?

**Ans.** Whether it is French, American or Mexican, it’s the actual change and the consequent quality of life in the society that matters. Lacan’s theoretical framework provides a firm foundation that forms the basis for these types of discursive attempts. And these are the meaningful attempts in each epoch of history; no doubt about that. It’s a never ending process, as dreams are. I am not a theorist in the strict sense; those critical tools make sense as it works for the same ends. Our relationship to language is basically one of abstractions. As we use language we should be able to communicate; should not lose the truth behind it, the concreteness behind it. So Lacan’s theoretical formulation on the relationship between language and the subject throws light on the inner mechanism of mind and the complexities of language use.

**Q.** A couple of years back, I think it’s in 1997, you wrote that ‘poetry—if it is poetry—is liberatory at its core’ (AP116). Can it be construed as a rejection of conventional expectations of poetry? Or are you ascribing the importance of the subversive power of language?

**Ans.** Language is the very medium of poetry. So we should know what it can do and what it cannot do; I mean its potential. It
should communicate, thus lend itself to social change. It is the problem and it is the very solution. But it has to work against the very oppressive structures with which they have been built. And poets have to make use of this medium for subversive purposes and to build up a community of resistance. Poetry has this immense power of language even to expect the unexpected. I want poetry with the ethical and artistic responsibility it demands.

Q. In one of the interviews you said that poems were a way of talking about what you couldn’t talk about any other way. Is it the type of language that gives you this flexibility? Could you make it a little clearer?

Ans. Poetry is always a matter of fascination for me; so language as well. It should communicate; it should connect the people as they are with their inner desires and aspirations. It has the capacity to express the simple and complex aspects of our lives; I mean the ordinariness of our lives.

Q. Looking at your essays and prose writings, I feel that there exists an inextricable relation between your poetry and prose. Certain essays like WWDA gave you a chance to retreat and look at your poems that you wrote almost twenty or more years back, as you did with “The Aunt Jennifer Tigers,” “Orion” and “At a Bach Concert.” After the publication of Arts of the Possible,
collection of essays and conversations during a period of more than thirty years), it seems, you haven’t written any significant prose. Do you have any project in your mind?

**Ans.** My first prose writing was about poetry. It was some book reviews for Poetry. I never thought of myself as an essayist. So I didn’t do much prose on my own, except in my journals. But involvement in politics made me write prose more as a part of my writing. And somebody’s request to speak for an occasion or write an essay for a journal often ended with prose writing.

**Q.** There is a remarkable period of more than fifty long years between your first book, *A Change of World* (1951) and the recent book, *The School Among the Ruins* (2004). I feel that there is a shift in your theory of poetry: from poetry as substitution to poetry as composition. Could you comment on that?

**Ans.** It’s true that there is a progressive shift from my early writings to my recent writings. It’s evident. Poems in *A Change of World* were mostly written during my student days. And it reflects the concerns and trends of domesticity during 1950s. And the proximate influence of the modernist period was also a major factor. So the first two volumes of poems speak of that very well. Then the conflicts in personal and professional life find its room in the subsequent books. And I feel that it’s true
with every writer. As I reached the recent book, *School Among the Ruins*, I feel that it’s different altogether.

**Q.** Your personally revealing essay, I mean, “The Split at the Root” and poems like “Sources” speak of very much these conflict and the split of identity as a poet and identity as that of a woman. In addition, much of your poetry has emerged out of these two strands of your identity. By writing it out, have you ever felt it as a settled issue? Or are you still living with that?

**Ans.** For me, it’s still an unresolved concern; I feel that even now as I travel and meet with the people. The present seems to be so fragmented and incoherent unless you have an awareness of the past. So whatever happened between 1940’s and 50’s has left its impact on me. Writing of those unforgotten past made me strong as a woman and a poet.

**Q.** As time runs short I would like to ask one more question. It’s something about the current invasion of Iraq by the Bush Administration and the consequent war protest that has been going on in different parts of the country. Do you find any similarity between the Vietnam War protest that you gave leadership and the present protests?

**Ans.** Only the time zone is changed. By hearing the rising death toll day by day, whether it is Iraqis or Americans, I feel a sense of
prophecy that I envisioned in The Dark Fields of the Republic. Bureaucratic administration, then or now, has its own justification and political agenda.

[It was really an unforgettable experience talking to one of the best American poets of the 20th century on a personal level. She posed for a couple of snaps and I thanked her in a special way for her cordial gesture.]