# Democracy, Openness, and Solidarity through Interrogation: Questions in Denise Riley's and Anna Mendelssohn's Poems

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**Abstract**

This paper examines how Denise Riley and Anna Mendelssohn employ interrogation sentences and linguistic ambiguity to resist the imposition of pre-defined identities. The analysis focuses on how grammatical 'errors' and structural ambiguities eliminate presuppositions of answers, making the poems open for interpretation, and extending a form of democracy. It studies how Riley uses interrogative statements to evade self-definitions, and how Mendelssohn uses them to refuse categories.

**Keywords**: Interrogative, Gender, Language, Sexuality, Reclamation, Interpellation

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## Introduction

The fundamental difference between an interrogative and a declarative statement is their linguistic structure. In addition, anticipation of an answer also makes a question distinctive from

a statement. Most often, the enquirer's subconscious presupposes an answer even before the utterance of the question. When declarative statements reflect confidence in possessing knowledge, interrogative statements confess a lack of knowledge. The anticipation or demand of an answer is, in other words, a request for knowledge or information. Inquisitiveness, a highly desirable quality, is foundational to the genesis of interrogative words, terms, and structure in sentences. Questions become vital in our day-to-day exchanges, for they hold an important role in the knowledge consumption process, as answers depend on the questions asked. Syntactically posed questions encompass different dimensions. Literature embraces linguistically different or ambiguous questions, as well as questions of social relevance. These questions also hold philosophical and psychological importance. Historicizing the philosophical idea of questions leads initially to the Renaissance and back to all the inventions and discoveries from fire to semiconductors. The questions asked by the human ancestors led to the developments that shape the world today. From wheels, apples, sun, and moon to rules, virgin birth, and stereotypes, all the revolutionary changes that had ever happened were due to the questions asked.

The twenty-first-century poetry is rich with interrogative sentences. The ensuing discussion addresses this topic. There could be a few reasons for the pattern of questioning in poetry. The strong effect of a collective past (whose intensity remains debatable) and memory of the tyrannical powers must be one of the causes. Another reason could be the inherited sense of Renaissance skepticism, which is distinct from the traumatic cause. The tyrannical powers that emerged in various parts of the world during and after the World Wars started controlling their subjects according to their own terms— "interpellation of 'individuals' as subjects[1]"(Althusser 108). Interpellation eliminates the possibility of existence beyond the definitions that specific

[1] However it is also important to understand that Althusser's idea of interpellation is different. Though he identifies it, he opines it to inescapable. According to him, Human beings are conditioned to live according to the interpellated identities. Ideology itself is very problematic—precisely because it is very abstract.

forms of power ascribe to an assumed homogeneous group of people. This dominant State ideology assumes the existence of only two genders and forces the idea of heteronormativity into people—gender and sexuality are just two examples among the many. Many of the twentieth-century women poets protest against the power politics of interpellation to escape themselves and others from the burden (of interpellation) and celebrate their individuality. The paper focuses on selected poems by two postmodern women writers, Denise Riley and Anna Mendelsohn. It attempts to examine how the poems strategically use questions and linguistic ambiguity to resist the predefinition of identities and the dominant power structures that control the narrative. The paper argues that these linguistic tools offer a form of democracy and solidarity that traditional declarative statements sometimes fail to provide.

Language is an essential device for any kind of power to execute its objectives or propaganda. Denise Riley's poem "A Note on Sex and the Reclaiming of Language" identifies the language of power and manipulation and responds to it with an alternate reclaimed language. This act of reclamation results from asking relevant and important questions—Who is reclaiming language and from whom? Why is it important to reclaim language? What are the aspects that have been reclaimed? The word "Savage" (*Selected Poems* 11) at the beginning of the poem could purport answers to most of these questions. The politics of language, being an interesting area of study, has noted the roles that power plays in it. The terms and labels used to indicate the subalterns and the others who lack institutional power (including women) are derogatory. Seats of power have always used the agency of language to subjugate the already marginalized. Ironically, to fight against this power, language becomes a necessary medium for resistance. The inadequacy of language to communicate the feelings and emotions of homosexuals has been discussed by scholars; this is a typical example of how power excludes certain communities and communities from language. In Riley's attempts to reclaim, she creates a language of resistance.

As Audre Lorde wrote, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (110), resistance requires new tools and language. Riley's solidarity lies with those who have been standing outside the boundaries of power. She uses her agency of art to "reclaim"(11), as a protest against the interpellation of identities.

"Savage", being personified in the poem, represents the colonized native who returns to their country with a "baggage of sensibility" (11)—the burden of being civilized and cultured is forced upon an individual once they visit the land of the colonizer. "The gaze […] with myth"(11) represents stereotyping of identities or places with "a single story"[2]. This gaze identifies with Marlowe's (*The Heart of Darkness*) gaze. Further, as the poem attempts to define the term "she", it answers questions that were not voiced hitherto. In its effort to redefine words, the poem consequently interrogates existing stereotypes. In instances like "she is imagining her wife"(12) and "she-husband" (12), the poem initiates a substitution of female pronouns—disrupting social and linguistic norms and thereby reclaiming language. The inadequacy of language to explain relations in a homosexual relationship is therefore questioned and answered simultaneously. The term "she-husband" and the definition of being a "she" assure that the poem does not create another stereotype. The reported line, "she is asked to buy wood carvings, which represent herself,"(11) indicates a question that is absent explicitly. Additionally, the interrogative term "is asked to" in the question illustrates forced capitalism, which sells identities as well as cultures.

The question that follows is much more complex than it appears to be: "She is imagining her wife & how will she live her?" (12)The reclaiming on a social level is assisted with semantic and syntactic 'errors' that the poem commits. The usual subject auxiliary inversion in questions

[2] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in a talk mentions the dangers of "a single story". For example, a single story about Africa was created through literature of early times in which the continent is portrayed as poor and uncivilized. That is the single story that has been communicated about the place. Everything else about the continent get reduced to this identity of being "poor" and "uncivilized" (Adichie, "Single Story").

is absent. However, is it really a question? She is imagining (a) her wife and (b) how will she live her. The second part (b) could also be the subject of imagination and hence not a question but an embedded question. A question mark wouldn't suffice to categorize the sentence as an interrogative sentence. The predicate properties are also violated as the object, "her", does not answer the question what/whom with respect to the verb "live". Here, an intransitive verb masquerades as a transitive verb in the absence of a preposition. The "ungrammatical" question reclaims language linguistically as well, by revolting against its syntactic and semantic rules. Coming back to the question, multiple interpretations can be made out of it. It could be "how will she live [without] her?", or "how will she l[ea]ve her?" (12) Omission of the preposition is what makes the sentence ambiguous. The verb cannot act on an object. It evokes a deep sense of personal empathy (to live her) as well. The question, however, is distinguished by its approach, for it transcends or tries to transcend presuppositions of answers. With structural ambiguity, the poem keeps the question widely open. Essentially, questions that include interrogative words who, which, what, where, when, and why are categorized as open-ended. The answers to a question have to supply lexical components that satisfy the characteristic features of the interrogative word used in the question (Robinson 4). For example, the answer to a question that includes the interrogative word "who" would be a person. Hence, linguistically open-ended questions, which explicitly do not limit answers to a given set of choices like the closed questions, have their own internalized methods of presupposing the answer. By introducing linguistic ambiguities, the poem tries to eliminate these possibilities of presupposition and makes them open (not linguistically) for interpretation.

Denise Riley's questions are not linguistically rhetorical. They espouse a rhetorical tone infrequently. Most of them also tend to question the speaker's self and the speaker's personal history. Riley's title "What I Do" follows the linguistic structure of Stein's "What Do I See". They both carry an embedded question. The poem is centered on the legend of Bluebeard man,

whose wives disappear mysteriously one after the other. The murder he commits is also the result of a power hierarchy. The hidden skeletons in the cupboard see light only when the next wife comes in, opens the cupboard, and reveals the mystery about the missing wives. This, however, would cost the new wife her life. The poem empathizes with this fate and subjugation that is passed on from generation to generation. "What", though essentially a question, is used here to explain or rather assert and confirm (Yes, this is what I do, this is what I am). The speaker says that it is an "even time" and it hasn't been violent "lately"(*Selected Poems* 26). The violence could indicate the violence towards individuality and identity.

The question, "Is my name 'skeleton' or only 'cup'?" (26) could have multiple interpretations. Name, most often, is a fixed denotation. It is highly unlikely that one would ask her own name to somebody else. The least plausibility makes the sentence pragmatically ambiguous. The speaker thus questions her own identity through the question. The question comes with choices, and the presence of the word "only" increases the number of choices. The question asked hence becomes, am I just a cup or a skeleton as well? If the word "only" is used to reduce the identity to merely a cup, then the answer has to be either a cup or a skeleton. The first case is further complicated, a person with two names, multiple identities, becomes a subject of question for the power. The poem simultaneously questions the homogeneity of traditionally defined identities and refuses to state the subject's identity by choosing either one or the other.

The poem "Laibach Lyrik: Slovenia, 1991" is set against the backdrop of the civil war that broke out in Slovenia in 1991. It led to the declaration of independence on 25 June 1991 and was an initiation to the Yugoslav wars that followed. The speaker's identity crisis, which was a result of these wars and the subsequent division of countries, is expressed in this poem. The lines,

...Did I grow up for this

to take new designations, learn to hate my neighbours just because of where I came from, which I never used to know? The last war stopped

before my mother's birth. Who says I must be 'Bosnian' now.

I grew up Yugoslavian. (Riley, *Selected Poems* 30)

ask the very important question of who decides one's identity?—"Who says I must be 'Bosnian' now." The sentence is a question without punctuation. The lack of a question mark gives multiple meanings to the statement. In a sense, the question becomes more rhetorical and declarative. It reveals someone who demands that the speaker be "Bosnian." It also rhetorically answers that such demands on another subject's identity cannot be practically fulfilled. The answer and reasoning follow with, "I grew up Yugoslavian." The lines are an act of protest in a language different from the dominant one. They respond to enforced conventional definitions of identity with language and existence. "I grew up Yugoslavian" is declarative of the speaker's existence and identity. It contests with the definitions that deem the speaker a 'Bosnian'. The poem addresses the collision of an individual's process of identity and socially assigned identities. Another poem, "The Castalian Spring," with divided sections, encompasses questions about the self-identity of the speaker, who has strong similarities to the poet herself. "Did I need to account for myself as noise-maker?" (Riley, *Selected Poems* 91) and "..lone mother of three?" (91) are examples.

These identity enquiries could be read in parallel with Denise Riley's prose work, *The Words of Selves*. The work includes an enormous number of questions, which fall outside the scope of this paper. However, Riley tries to theorize "self-description's linguistic effect," (*Words of Selves* 22) and problematizes all kinds of statements that people use to define their self. These are, linguistically, declarative sentences. Thus, the questions included in Riley's poetry can be understood as defenses to evade the tones of confession/congratulation and "seduction

technique"(22), which, according to her, self-descriptions possess. In this light, it is interesting to note that most questions in her poems primarily question identity. She states that "self-portrayal's affect embraces a prominent performance genre of staged admissions: that of confessing" (25). Riley's poems, with a linguistic makeover, ask questions about identity and self. They (un)intentionally confess a lack of knowledge on the subject—note that the poems do not use the rhetorical tone. The self-portrayal, hence, becomes the confessions of multiple identities and hybrid definitions. Riley even theorises the rhetorical and says that they are "indirect, yet forcefully directing" (23). When they assume a linguistic form of questions, rhetoric forcefully directs to a particular and obvious answer.

Questions generally are requests for metaphysical sorting. Riley herself talks about the need to be enrolled in one "club"(24) or another. This desire to belong to a community conflicted with the aversion to self-description results in the interrogative tones that guard the poems as the poet struggles to identify her nationality and identity. Another aspect of questioning self-identity is that it would be, usually, pragmatically incorrect. Riley references Hegel to explain this. Language assumes a state of power that enables people to alienate their self. This, in turn, makes it plausible to ask questions about oneself— for example, 'What is my name?'

'Statement-questions,' as this paper will term them, appear repeatedly in twenty-first-century poetry. Their linguistic structure resembles statements and would have an interrogative punctuation at the end. In spoken language, they would be distinguished by the interrogative intonation. In her novel *Americanah,* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about these statement-questions. The protagonist, a Nigerian woman, says about the "teenage American accent that made her [a character's] sentences sound like questions" ( *Americanah* 290). These statement-questions, though, seem to sound like questions, are ultimately statements. This linguistic structure makes sense with the non-verbal intonation and could have multiple reasons. Lack of

self-confidence and lack of confidence in their opinions could be one. Another reason could be to provide openness and thus be democratic. Questions allow other participants in a conversation to engage. They can be invitations, though usually notorious for being intimidating.

Examples of such 'statement-questions' are found in Riley's poems. Her poem "Well All Right" is one where the speaker describes an experience with the swans in a first-person narrative. Recurring use of the first-person narrative is common in Riley's poems. As the speaker describes the grant clock of the bird, they pose this question— "want to slip out of it?"(*Selected Poems* 67). "The Affections of the Ear" is another poem that encompasses an interesting question. The poem is centered on the mythological figure Narcissus, who will live if he reconciles with self-knowledge. The bracketed question, "I should explain myself, I sound derivative?"(95), hints at a self-description that Riley evades with questions. The lines translate a linguistically declarative sentence into a question by adding punctuation and thus escape categorization of the self. These incomplete questions, in which the subject is omitted and which do not strictly follow the linguistic structure of a question with the subject-verb inversion, appear repeatedly in Riley's poetry.

Anna Mendelssohn is another postmodern woman poet who indulges in varying types of questions as well. The poem that starts with "now that I can collect shades" (Mendelssohn 118) describes the speaker(who is a woman)'s achievement or success in her art. Nevertheless, she has to face the ultimate question of "no good for parenting?" (118). This question is also syntactically incomplete. Without the punctuation, it becomes a statement that asserts a stereotype that working mothers are not good parents. The punctuation questions the stereotype rather than posing a question to the speaker. Similarly, in the fourth part of Riley's poem "The Seven Strangely Exciting Lies", the speaker poses a similarly structured question, "call yourself a mother?"(*Selected Poems* 79). The absence of the word "do" in Old English is

hinted at by these two questions.

*The Oxford History of English* discusses the important changes that modern English has undergone after it began to use the verb 'do'. The text provides an example of the linguistic structure of a question before the usage of 'do'—"Send I a letter?"(Mugglestone 162). Today, the question would be linguistically correct if it were structured as "Did I send a letter?" This history states the very close relationship between statements and questions. Change in intonation is the most important factor in spoken language that distinguishes questions from statements. If the interrogative words evolved with time, statements with an interrogative intonation could have easily served the purpose of questioning.

The statement-questions are sentences that could be easily passed as statements. However, the questions/statements themselves hold importance. The question, "call yourself a mother?", "no good for parenting?" questions the motherhood of a working and artistic woman. The concept of a working woman differs vastly from the patriarchal gender roles. Hence, a woman prioritising her work over her children and other relations is perceived as selfish. The identity of women being reduced to mothers, questioning their duties as mothers, and morally judging the working mothers, are society's ways to enchain women. While the male counterpart is easily presented with the 'good father' title, much is not required from them.

Anna Mendelssohn dedicates a poem to those readers who approach in search of answers. Women poets like Gertrude Stein and Denise Riley, through their poems, have taken stances that serve as answers to the socio-political questions of their time. Their language questions the gendered language of power. However, the twenty-first-century poets have not limited themselves to answering. They raise questions through their poems. Implicit and open questions are presented to readers, thereby extending interpretive freedom. This diversion from the general assumption that the advocates of 'art for life' would answer questions through their

art is questioned by Mendelssohn's poem, "to any who want poems to give them answers"(34). The inability to ask relevant and important questions and the collective psychology that shifts responsibility to answer onto others are criticized by Mendelssohn as she says, "not that they ask interesting questions. / only that they expect answers" (34).

bell hooks identifies the problem with the term "collective oppression", as the gender oppression that a white woman and a woman of color experience might not be the same. Difference in sexuality contributes to the oppression as well. This distinction, according to hooks, must be understood and solved to fight the greater oppression of patriarchy (hooks 4-6). Gayatri Spivak, on the other hand, asks for a different strategy, where an oppressed or minority community, including women, comes together "momentarily" forgetting their internal differences and struggles for emancipation and empowerment (Ashcroft 77 ). Both these theoreticians identify the differences in experience that each individual within a community struggles with, and hence, essentializing identities is problematic. However, developing a 'sisterhood' to support and declare solidarity with each other is essential. Women poets like Anna Mendelssohn and Denise Riley, with their agency of language, extend support and empathize with those whose oppression they identify with. Their solidarity is selective in a positive sense, by identifying and acknowledging the presence of woman patriarchs. They do not further create a stereotype of 'men' who are collectively oppressive. Hence, it is also understood that there are explicitly and clearly two sections: the oppressed and the oppressors. Neither the theoreticians nor the poets create this binary. It defies simple binary categorization. As we acknowledge the presence of the oppressed, the existence of the oppressor is taken. The gray area between both, however, does not become a point of discussion. Nevertheless, their existence is not negated. These women poets also identify these two sections and align themselves with the oppressed.

With a first-person narrative, Anna Mendelssohn successfully keeps her carefully balanced questions and statements open and assertive. The "I" in the poem "I Object" narrates the speaker's viewpoint, making it highly subjective. However, some instances in the poem place "I" in a particular community and make her the representative of it. The singular/plural distinction of "you" is purposefully ambiguous in the poem because, overtly, the poem sounds like a personal experience, involving a singular subject— "you". But the implicit plural "you" indicate a whole community. Ambiguity in the lines veils the implicit. Therefore, the poem becomes an objection to a collective community's atrocities towards another community through personal experiences.

The poem begins with reducing the subject into a "thing"(22)—wild and untamed. Further, the subject is addressed as "it" in another statement-question, "Will it ever...stop talking to men"(22). The objectified nature of the subject is thus emphasized. The poem is another example of careful revolt against stereotypes, where binaries are not replaced with binaries. This meticulousness is particularly visible as the poem transforms "dictating" (22)into a gender-fluid verb. The instance exemplifies the democracy that the poem executes, while opposing interpellation, without simultaneously propagating it. Thus, the poem carefully places her empathy over the women who are subjugated and is clearly against the (wo)men who hold paternalistic patriarchal behavior. The mother in the poem represents the anxiety of inherited trauma and marginalisation of her children. Alice Notley, in her *Songs and Stories of the Ghoul,* expresses this anxiety with a loud backdrop of guilt. In her poem that begins with "The ghoul-girl," the speaker says, "I bore a child said she and cruel to see it perceived as I" (Notley 5). The reason for the "antagonism" (22) is provided by the speaker in Mendelssohn's poem with a single-worded question and its answer, "defensive? ancestrally strict"(22). The line demonstrates a defense that is ancestrally inherited. This conditioned anxiety about lack of "warmth," or the threat of violence, in the world that makes mothers (un)consciously "mean and bitter"(22).

The shifting role of the two words in the title is explained in the lines, “I was the object of her hatred. I object to being hated”(22). The active role that she takes up in the second instance could be a result or reaction of the passive role she was forcefully subjected to in the first instance. Thus, the speaker questions the objectification in the beginning and also questions her own objections as the poem concludes. These are instances of stances that the speaker takes to emphasize her alliances.

Most of Mendelssohn’s poems, like the one discussed, include two kinds of people. One she relates to, a group, a community—the oppressed. The other is the oppressor. The poem that begins with “A man who snatches” distinguishes these two sections. The poem describes the family as an embodiment of two sections: one, the privileged, and the other, the subjugated. The speaker relates to one half, and the other half is the wide category of ‘you’. The entire poem thus tries to answer the question, “Tell me why you won't let my father into your camera/museum?”(9). “You” stand against those who are denied equality and freedom. The poem interrogates a “you” who holds power. Nevertheless, she refuses to define them—“ I'm not suggesting that any of you are landlords—only—/we are very different”(9). Mendelssohn chooses people to whom she extends her solidarity. Neither does she define the two sections as the agents of power nor gives definitions to communities and sections. The selective blindness of power towards individuals is criticized and resisted by her.

Mendelssohn’s poetry does not limit itself to personal experience. They, at times, become explicitly political as well. “Is the economy mysterious or isn't it a matter of a lost card game?” (9) is an example where she provides a closed question with restricted answers. The question clearly provides two options to choose from: (a) Is the economy mysterious? and (b) isn’t it a matter of a lost card game? The moment the questioner provides two options, the answer is presupposed and limited to either of them. Even the possibility of a corrective answer is

completely negated. The second question, being a linguistically rhetorical question, erases the existence of the first question and limits the question further. Though the interrogative form of communication seemingly gives readers the freedom to take a stand, questions like these do not. The question, "Will one of them tell me why everyone is talking about money?"(9) places double interrogation in the sentence and creates ambiguity. Linguistically, the answer to the question should be a yes or a no. A mutual knowledge exists between the reader and the speaker that the presupposed answer is an explanation for the question that is embedded. The poet initiates illocutionary[3] communication through these kinds of questions.

The paper focuses on the different questions in the poems of Anna Mendelssohn and Denise Riley. The presence of these questions declares democratic space in the poem, offering solidarity and openness. They fight against the process of interpellation, rigid categories and homogeneity. While Riley uses her interrogative sentences to not engage in self-defining statements, Mendelssohn is careful not to emphasize existing definitions or to create further categories. They, in a sense, extend their practiced democracy to the oppressors when they refuse to define the violent.

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[3] Illocutionary communication is when an idea is communicated implicitly through a sentence. For example: "The floor is slippery" communicates a warning implicitly.

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