CHAPTER FOUR

RICH IN HER CONTEXTS: A CRITIQUE OF POWER

Through a career that spans more than fifty years, Rich has served as a model for a whole generation of 20th century poets and activists of the United States. Since the selection of her first volume by W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets in 1951, Adrienne Rich's work has continually broken new grounds. To be more specific, Rich has attempted to combine poetry and politics in the content of her poems, in her themes, and in the female poetics that she has developed as a natural outcome of her poetic talent. In Rich there is a “rare fusion of vision and action, the ability to suggest not only to others but to herself a course of action in the mind and follow it in the next breath in the world” (Boland, “Reading Adrienne Rich” 17).

Those who are involved in the women’s movement and who follow literature are aware of the vital role the movement played in effecting the social and political change in our century. Historical trends such as the civil rights movements and the women’s movement created a favourable atmosphere for women's poetry. These forces had their impact on women’s writings in post-World War II America. The Cold War, the nuclear age, the Vietnam War, the Holocaust, the McCarthy
years, the renewal of radicalism in the 1960s, the cultural revolution of the late ‘60s and ‘70s—these are the dramatic events to which Rich explicitly responded. These cultural forces—reflected in film, painting, theatre, music and popular songs during these periods— informs her life and shaped her writing.

In the mid-sixties, Rich lived and worked in New York City, where she became involved in the Black Movement for justice, the movement that supported the self-organizing of poor working people and widespread antiwar protests. At the same time, Rich read widely in women’s literature and history and was drawn into women’s movement leadership through her interviews, her poetry readings, teaching and lectures. Rich says “I’ve been coming out as a poet, a poet who is a citizen, a citizen who is a poet” (qtd. in Bere 554). She was of the opinion that it was difficult to see those identities come together in a country with the particular traditions and attitudes regarding poetry that ours has. Her life witnessed change from a married woman to a lesbian, from the feminist to the outspoken political activist. Accepting the roles assigned by society, Rich moved from “dutiful daughter / apprentice to mother / creator, excelling—poetically, at least-- within the boundaries of her sex, generation and class” (McDaniel 3).

Accordingly, Rich’s career has been marked by major shifts: from early beginnings as a somewhat traditional poet to
a far more experimental, revisionist poet. In her poetry Rich defined and redefined her role as a poet and visualized a common language capable of expressing her vision and mission. In her prose writings Rich spoke of her own growth and development as a poet, of the relationship between poetry and activism, of the need to reconcile poetry and politics and of the responsibility of the poet. An emphasis on the power of patriarchy and an acknowledgement of a woman-centred poetic tradition which validates women’s art and other women as the basis of transforming power are among the motifs that emerge as central to her writings.

In this chapter the area of investigation is Rich’s meditations on power through several stages. In her writings, we can trace a linear progression in the understanding of the concept of power: from a negative experience of power to a productive and positive articulation of power and from harmful to beneficial forms of power. Through the analyses of selected poems that celebrate the lives of women and the circumstances under which they were written, one can see how Rich continually defines and redefines her concept of power until she rejects power-as-force (patriarchal power) for the power-to-transform. In the first part is explored Rich’s early awareness of power, which manifests itself in its paradigms of patriarchy. In Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), a book
rooted in her own past that describes her early childhood, adolescence and vocation as a poet, Rich writes, “The idea of power has, for most women, been inextricably linked with maleness, or the use of force; most often with both” (70). Either woman is the one upon whom the power is exercised or else she is deemed incapable of exercising it because she is not male. Thus, Rich perceived woman's experience of power as negative in the context of hierarchical social relationships.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the process by which Rich moves towards a new understanding of the power of the poet and the power of woman. The critique of power that Rich deploys here comes to a culmination with the quest for a woman-centred world in her dream of a common language. Therefore the discussion is limited to the consideration of Rich’s notion of power reflected in key stories, myths, allusions, and themes in her writings in the first three decades of her career. Rich’s concept of transforming power that shapes her female aesthetics falls in line with that of Michel Foucault who provided one of the most prominent delineations of power. This chapter therefore takes into account Foucault’s specific ideas on the inner mechanisms of power relevant to the understanding of Rich’s redefined concept of power.

The Oxford English Dictionary gives two meanings for the word “power”: the first is the “ability to do or effect something or
anything, or to act upon a person or thing” (OED). The word “power” in this sense mostly occurs as part of the phrase “has power to”. “Power” here, then, is shorthand for the ability to do something; it is a characteristic of a particular. In this usage, it is not only human beings to whom power can be attributed, but all entities. Here the concept of power functions in a relational manner. That means it is applicable to social agents who can reasonably be said to control or to command others.

The second meaning of the term “power” given by the OED is as follows: “Possession of control or command over others; dominion, rule; government, domination, sway, command; control, influence, authority”. This is the sense of power as “power-over” rather than “power to”. The expressions “power-to” and “power-over” are simple ways of making a distinction between two fundamentally different ordinary language contexts within which the term “power” occurs. A great deal of disagreement exists among theorists of power with regard to the fundamental question as to whether power is beneficial or harmful as a social presence. It shows that only by paying attention to the particular use of power that is at issue can we specify whether power is harmful or beneficial. A closer investigation of the concept of power in the works of Rich also shows that there is no common point of agreement. On the one hand, power seems a necessary and positive feature of both an
individual's life and a society’s; on the other, it seems to be the root of many of the deepest problems of a society. Indeed, the conflict over whether power is beneficial or harmful is one that cannot be solved, because power is really both (Wartenberg 12). In certain circumstances, it is a positive and necessary feature of society; in others, it is negative.

In many ways, in Rich’s first three books of poems—*A Change of World* (1951), *The Diamond Cutters* (1955) and *Snapshots Of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963)—Rich conceives her concept of power as force, control, “power-over” in terms of patriarchy. Recollecting the past, in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) Rich writes, “Besides man’s power over us …women have experienced that *powerfulness* as the expressive energy of an ego… we have experienced man’s brute battle for power as terror” (70). Thus, her first phase of writing reflects woman’s negative experience of power. “It must be repeated” Rich adds, “that women’s primary experience of power till now has been triply negative: we have experienced men’s power as oppression; … our own vitality and independence as somehow threatening to men; and, even when behaving with “feminine passivity,” we have been made aware of masculine fantasies of our potential destructiveness” (*OWB* 71). Rich is aware of the conflicting states of power: the patriarchal “power-over” as women’s powerlessness and “the transformative
power” as power of women. Thus, Rich’s poetry shows the process and progression of power by embracing the new understandings of power in the place of once accepted uses of power.

In her first book of poems, *A Change of World* (1951), the twenty-one-year-old Rich accepts certain traditions associated with the definition of power according to gender. For most women writers of Rich’s generation the traditionally accepted ways of writing coincide with patriarchal values, where “power is a male prerogative and subservience the prevailing mode of female behavior” (Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power* 15). When Rich talks about people and their roles in society, she necessarily conceives those roles in their particular contexts. This understanding assumes that a particular manner of conceptualizing people is reflected in her writings.

When W. H. Auden selected *A Change of World* for the Yale Series, he explained in his introduction to the volume why poems written in 1951 differ from poems written by the previous generation of poets. Auden estimated Rich as a follower of these great innovators and “the creators of a new style” in a cultural moment that witnessed crises on various levels (*ARPP* 278). This first collection, which reveals the influence of Eliot, Lowell, Pound, Stevens, and Frost, contains artfully crafted poems about her experience and preoccupations in a historical context. In
spite of their modernist influences, the poems reflect the intentions of women and their power and powerlessness. As for women poets, Rich looked “for the same things she had found in the poetry of men, because she wanted women poets to be equals of men, and to be equal was still confused with sounding the same” (Martin, *An American Triptych* 94). Thus, her early works exhibit a negative experience of power that often manifests itself through a tension between energy and restraint.

In her essay “The Anti-Feminist Woman” (1972) Rich defines both patriarchy and its exercise of power in terms of exclusion and elimination. By patriarchy she means “any kind of group organization in which males hold dominant power and determine what part females shall and shall not play, and in which capabilities assigned to women are relegated generally to the mystical and aesthetic and excluded from the practical and political realms” (*ARP* 101). Therefore, Rich recalls the intimidating power and all-pervading presence of patriarchy even decades after the publication of her first book in 1951:

Outside of the mother’s brief power over the child—subject to patriarchal interference—women have experienced power in two forms, both of them negative. The first is men’s power over us—whether physical, economic, or institutional.... Like other dominated people, we have learned to manipulate and seduce,
or to internalize men’s will and make it ours, and men have sometimes characterized this as “power”....

[Second], the possibility of “power” for women has historically been befogged by sentimentality and mystification. (OWB 68)

Being influenced by the style and stance of male writers Rich had the occasion to look closely at the ways of the male world that prevailed at that time. Based on what she saw of the subjugation of women and the feminine, Rich defines patriarchal power as force, the power-over and the power-to-control. In Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), Rich describes the inner mechanisms of male-female relationships as characterized by “lust, violence, possession, fear, conscious longing, unconscious hostility, sentimental rationalization: the sexual understructure of social and political forms” (74). Rich believes that “the power of the fathers has been difficult to grasp because it permeates everything, even the language in which we try to describe it” (OWB 57-58). She perceives the patriarchal world as unfit for women. As a result, Rich wants to get back to a source of power that does not destroy the basic dignity and integrity of human life. That life-enhancing and life-enriching power Rich located in women.

Beginning with her sense of what it means to be a woman, her poems in the early 1960s reach out to many facets of
American life—culture, history, customs, daily rituals, news from the warfront in Vietnam, city life, movies, and dreams (Greenwald 98). Rich places all these matters in the total perspective of the power of the patriarchy. Within the patriarchal system, Rich believes, woman is a marginal figure capable of seeing what men in power cannot see. Her own life experiences as well as the observation of the lives of other women in their marginal positions forced Rich to arrive at this conclusion. The concept of power that Rich's poetry exhibits is the expression of a radical vision. In the light of the events taking place in the society at the time as well as in her personal life, Rich writes:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men, by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (OWB 57)

Thus Rich's poems condemn the lies women speak in defense of male superiority and the secrets women hold within that keep them from developing a female community. These silences, Rich observes, negate a woman's full emergence into a power as a beneficent counterforce to male power.
“An Unsaid Word” (CW), a poem of seven lines from Rich’s first collection, makes an analysis of a static social presence—a woman’s negative experience of power. The poem overtly speaks about the social situation of the 1950s and the sexual mores that govern most of the man-woman relationships she observed around her:

She who has power to call her man
From that estranged intensity
Where his mind forages alone,
Yet keeps her peace and leaves him free,
And when his thoughts to her return
Stands where he left her, still his own,

Knows this the hardest thing to learn. (CW 51)

This poem is built upon the tensions and the undercurrents of power between man and woman. The woman with power to keep her man from his thoughts, to prevent his self-fulfilment, possesses the only power granted to the traditional wife. In this instance, it is the power of woman to destroy the husband’s creativity, depth, and peace, and the strength to endure the isolation and frustration in silence (Alkalay-Gut 54).

Here the woman in the poem could get the attention of her man through her power to seduce him. She chooses not to do this; hence the title “unsaid word”. Those unsaid words are the woman’s resistance written in power and for her to assume that
power is “the hardest thing to learn” (CW 51). This line may imply that it is hard to learn the strategies demanded by a woman's role. In fact, the man’s freedom seems predicated upon the limitations imposed on the woman. She finds these limits confining because she must repress her most elemental feelings. Rich's persona does not possess her own being; she depends upon man to validate her partial existence. From this deeply ambivalent beginning in this poem Rich’s poetry moves toward the shaping of forms of female power predicated upon a woman's possession of her own soul (Alkalay-Gut 55). In this connection, James Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* suggests that both the powerful and the powerless are constrained in their behaviour within the power relation (Scott 128). He shows, as Rich does in “An Unsaid Word,” that in their behavior with each other they may show their power and behave as master and slave, while, when out of each other's presence, they behave quite differently.

Rich’s poem “Bears” (DC) is an example of the experience of woman’s power when woman is left to herself. Along with “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” it is one of the two famous poems by Rich locating power in an imagined ferocious animal. It reveals the speaker’s fear, power, astonishment and pride at having dreamt of “wonderful bears”. However, it also constitutes a lament for awakening and losing those dreams. On the surface level the
woman expresses her sense of power at the possession of the bears in fantasy, but the poem slowly bears witness to the loss of that power:

Wonderful bears that walked my room all night,
Where are you gone, your sleek and fairy fur,
Your eyes’ veiled imperious light?
Brown bears as rich as mocha or as musk,

Where are you now? ...

Why do I wait and wait and never hear
Your thick nocturnal pacing in my room?
My bears, who keeps you now, in pride and fear? (CEP 73)

Here Rich manages to explore the power of the bears and their loss from the world of fantasy. Since bears represent force, Rich’s bears can stand for her creative power. However, she does not provide evidence for this creative power, nor for any other interpretation connected to the external world. This absence of connection is visible in the domestic space of “Bears” which confines the speaker’s scope to a nocturnal bedroom location without relating it to any external world. Nevertheless, locked inside the patriarchal pressures of the poet's marriage and
inci#ipient motherhood, “Bears” shows Rich’s longings for poetry and its ability to confer women’s power in the society and her role as wife.

The same type of constrained power relation, along with the same easy iambic pentameter and rhymes, and the same lucidity, is found in the female persona practising needlework in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”(CW), which presents a carefully distanced portrait of a woman alienated from her husband, the community, and even herself. Thus this poem is a metaphor for the divided self in which women are denied their power. Through the sublimation of her emotions and its expression in her craft, the woman tries to transcend the traditional dependency of her role as a wife. But this behavior leads her further into woman’s negative experience of power. Representing creative power, the tigers in the tapestry Aunt Jennifer embroiders are the focus of the opening stanza:

Aunt Jennifer’s tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will l
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid. (CW 19)

The final stanza indicates that the tigers will endure while Aunt Jennifer will die and that they will continue to represent her unfulfilled longings. The alliterative *p* as the proud tigers prance and pace becomes a voiceless fricative *f* as, driven by fear, Aunt Jennifer’s fingers flutter and find. The assonance of the long *e* sound links words from both sides: the ‘green’ and ‘tree’ and certainty of the tigers and the ‘fear’ and ‘screen’ of Aunt Jennifer. The closed couplets arranged in quatrains give the poem a balance and the rhymes function to reinforce the reason: the ring on her hand, as was already pointed out, is indeed a constricting band, as the tigers that she made are her effort to be proud and unafraid. In their strength, activity, and freedom from fear, the tigers are images of virility projected by the woman in the poem. However, she could not claim that power. Her mastery in her “craft” does not translate into personal power in her life. In projecting such an image, Rich unravels the negative mechanism of power at work.

Rich’s use of weaving as a metaphor for female creativity and the negative impact involved is also seen in the poem “Mathilde in Normandy” (CW). This poem is based upon the popular legend that Queen Mathilde, the wife of William the Conqueror, created the Bayeaux tapestry, which depicts the Norman Conquest of England. In “Mathilde in Normandy” as in
"Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers" the female persona projects what she is denied onto her handiwork. Mathilde has been presented in this poem as a prototype of women in the 1950s who lived an ordinary life in devotion and loyalty to man. She is engaged in traditional work, albeit art work, associated with women. Her work expresses not merely her creative power but her envy of man’s freedom to roam, to fight, and to vanquish; however, she is not in a position to acknowledge this. Her personal experience comes into conflict with her work as knots come into the tapestry (Whelchel 52). Thus, her attempt to transform the image of female handicraft into an activity connected to her creative power ends up in silence. The poem is built upon the insight that great moments in history do not announce themselves as such to individuals living through them.

Say what you will, anxiety there too
Played havoc with the skein, and the knots came
When fingers’ occupation and mind’s attention
Grew too divergent, at the keen remembrance
Of wooden ships putting out from a long bench,
And the grey ocean dimming to a void,
And the sick stained farewells, too sharp for speech.

(CW 53)

The domestic life of “the long-sleeved ladies” seems calm and pleasant on the surface with its music, bright daylight and
the women’s weaving. But the speaker cannot ignore the anxiety beneath this peaceful surface, especially when she conveys Mathilde’s thought that her husband might never return from “the grey ocean dimming to a void”. Mathilde’s committed love for a man and the happiness she finds therein and the considerations of her work not as art but as a pastime proper for ladies are common experiences of women. The tapestry of knots reveals the constraints and resistance associated with women’s power. Mathilde is silent about these common experiences, and her experience sums up the experience of all women about their power and powerlessness.

Rich’s perception of female power in contrast to the admiration of male power finds its poetic presentation in “The Snow Queen” (DC). The poem owes its title and content to the Hans Christian Andersen’s tale “The Snow Queen”. Andersen begins the tale with a mythic prologue: Goblins create a magic mirror that has the power to distort one’s vision. When the mirror shatters, the pieces go all over the world. If a piece gets into one’s eye, all that is beautiful seems ugly. If a piece gets into one’s heart, the heart turns into a lump of ice. Thus Rich’s poem has been built on the image of the “chip of mirror” that gave the child a distorted vision of the world and the “diamond splinter” under the ribs that “drives me through.”

Child with a chip of mirror in his eye
Saw the world ugly, fled to plains of ice
Where beauty was the Snow Queen's promises.
Under my lids a splinter sharp as his
Has made me wish you lying dead
Whose image digs the needle deeper still. (CEP 111)

The real subject of this poem is female creativity and power. The “you” that the speaker addresses is specified as neither male nor female at the beginning of the poem. Only towards the end of the poem does the female identity become discernible. The speaker’s shift from “a splinter sharp” to “needle deeper,” (CEP 111) referring to the image of the dead oppressor, shows the speaker’s experience of the searing wound. The perverse images in the second stanza of the poem add to the intensity of this experience. Rich’s firm conviction in male sinister power has been made clear through a paradox: “Yet here the Snow Queen’s cold prodigious will / Commands me, and your face has lost its power, / Dissolving to its opposite like the rest” (CEP 112). At the end of the poem, the speaker’s emphasis on the “diamond splinter”, an image of male power, “under my rib” is a return to the mythical prologue of the tale. The “you” dissolves as the splinter “sticks”. The speaker's wound as such described here is her acknowledgment of the creative power that has energized her. That power is male and forceful. Even so, her wound energizes her; she says it “drives me through”. Here the
female persona in the poem shows the unquestioning admiration of male power though it distorts her vision.

In *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955) Rich continued the imitation of traditional poetry; therefore her poems were not yet able to fulfil her longings or to discuss women-centred and political issues openly. In spite of that, the title poem “The Diamond Cutters” contains a particularity that years later would drive Rich to consider a shift toward the importance of the images in a poem. In an interview with David Montenegro in 1991, Rich blamed herself for not being conscious of the actual situation of African diamond miners when she wrote the poem. For her, the empirical, imaginary experience of a miner of diamonds is not sufficient for a poet to use it. Rich’s re-vision of this early poem concludes that a poet cannot lack in self-experience and knowledge in choosing a metaphor (Montenegro 8).

This metaphor of the diamond cutters gathers its power from a perception that an artist’s ability lies in his power to transform the material into a work of art. Through the central metaphor of “The Diamond Cutters,” Rich exposes power as force. This poem has been built upon the same type of psychic energy as is at work in “The Snow Queen,” because of the sharp nature of the splinter that pierces the eye of the child as well as the coldness of the diamond. By the sixties, Rich started to
substitute the traditional male aesthetic that she had learned from her mentors for a poetics more related to her personal life. Dealing with personal issues in her life gave her the necessary confidence to make experiments with her poetry, especially with regard to its tightly controlled form and tone:

Be serious, because
The stone may have contempt

Respect the adversary,
Meet it with tools refined,
And thereby set your price.
Be hard of heart, ...

Keep your desire apart.
Love only what you do,
And not, what you have done.

Be proud... *(CEP 131-32)*

By assuming the imperative form of language for that of certain precepts or directives, the female persona embodies a traditional form of masculine power and authority. In adopting this masculine voice by a female persona, Rich builds up an inextricable connection between masculinity and the creative process. Her control turns inward upon the self in various forms of restraint and disguise. In this poem Rich assumes the
superiority of the male principle of creative force. What a woman poet would sound like when she was not trying to sound the same as a man is, of course, something that Rich could not begin to articulate in 1955, the time of *The Diamond Cutters*.

In a statement during a poetry reading given in 1964, thus in between *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) and *Necessities of Life* (1966), Rich discusses this shift her technique of writing had undergone to explain the transformation her poems suffered:

> I have been increasingly willing to let the unconscious offer its materials, to listen to more than one voice of a single idea. Perhaps a simple way of putting it would be to say that instead of poem *about* experiences I am getting poems that *are* experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it. (*ARPP* 165)

In this passage, she clearly reveals that she previously wrote plotted poems. Thus, from this new shift in poetry of the sixties, Rich expressed her resolve to produce “poems that *are* experiences” (*ARPP* 165). She arrived at this demand for an active role in her poetry by rereading her initial poems with this conclusion: “Even the ones I liked best and which I felt I’d said most, were queerly limited; that in many cases I had suppressed,
omitted, falsified even, certain disturbing elements, to gain that perfection of order” (ARPP 165).

Although Rich did not specify what those “disturbing elements” consisted of, she started to lose connection to the traditional “perfection of order,” increasing her commitment to feminist issues in the poems in Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law. The publication of Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law in 1963 clearly marks a transition between her artfully crafted male-influenced poems of the two previous books to a more perceptive form of poetry. The “disturbing elements” generated during that time were responsible for a meditation about her roles as a woman, wife, mother and poet. In Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, she abandoned rhyme, for the most part, as well as iambic verse.

The use of the first person pronoun “I” in her poems, something absent from her previous texts, assumes importance. In her essay “When We Dead Awaken” (1971), Rich gives the reasons for the eight-year delay for Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law and reflects on why she was not able to use the personal pronoun by that time:

In the late fifties I was able to write, for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman ... in fragments during children’s naps, brief hours in a library, or 3:00 A.M. after rising with a wakeful child. I
despaired of doing any continuous work at this time. Yet I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on a paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be “universal,” which meant, of course, nonfemale. (ARPP 175)

This “nonfemale” is intrinsically linked to her experience at that time. The above passage made it clear that in her poetry of the fifties the mixing of personal and public realities was not allowed. These situations demonstrate Rich’s capacity for collecting female customs in the public realm, in order to expose them more critically. Fusing close, private, female images spread in different stanzas, the author presents snapshots of women’s lives.

Each section of the poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” depicts a different voice, as Rich informs us: “I have been increasingly willing ... to listen to more than one voice of a single idea” (ARPP 165). The first three stanzas of the poem address three different women in their contexts. The first stanza depicts a woman recalling her youth and pride:

You, once a belle in Shreveport,

with henna-colored hair, skin like a peachbud,
still have your dresses copied from that time,

and play a Chopin prelude

called by Cortot “Delicious recollections

float like perfume through the memory”. (CEP 145)

This first part that recalls a past frame of mind indicates a possibility of integrating the public and the personal in poetry. The “you” addressed in the poem can refer to the poetic self in a kind of dialogue with herself. At the same time, this “you” can refer to any woman that lived her youth in the forties and fifties or any other who could fit the proposed domestic and romantic situation. Thus, Rich is not just writing a third person poem about an episode distant from her personal experience as she did in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” but rather addressing her reader from an individual perspective.

Through each frame, the speaker either describes a social situation lived by different women or seeks a change in their attitudes: “Dulce ridens, dulce loquens, / she shaves her legs until they gleam / like petrified mammoth-tusk” (CEP 146). These three lines which form the whole fifth section of the poem can be used to depict how the persona manages to summarize customs society has imposed upon women. In other words, they show the persona moving from a particular to a general realm. The first line borrowed from Ode 22, “Integer vitae” of Horace
translated as “sweetly laughing, sweetly speaking” serves to illustrate the practice that surrounds leg shaving in a hairdresser, in some cultures something done to while away time. Moreover, the use of this motto from Latin supports the accepted way that a woman shaves her leg in a natural and hilarious mood.

Thus, each fragment of the poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” brings different women in particular situations that move through domestic activities, criticizing their excessive vanity, and in the last section, proposing change. After having assumed many voices, Rich seems at the end of the poem to be released to assume a leader’s voice: “Well, / she’s long about her coming, who must be / more merciless to herself than history” (SD 149). By borrowing the image of woman as a helicopter and a bird from Simone de Beauvoir, Rich makes her intent clear. Reduced in length, these lines gain strength due to the use of imperatives to counsel and command the reader, specifically women readers. This technique is quite different from the elaborate sentences and the iambic verse shown in the fifties, which sometimes confined meanings just to keep rhyme or metre. As many of these features are recurrent in Rich’s subsequent books, it is concluded that Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law gave birth to a kind of poetry that would guide Rich’s writings in the future. In her attempt to make her poems
universal or what she calls “nonfemale” (ARPP 175), Rich initiates her movement toward a redefinition of power in her writings. Thus, the poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” unravels the troubled history of women and makes Rich a witness to woman’s history and her power.

In “The Knight” (SD), a poem that presents a contrast in its first two parts, the speaker identifies herself with a male hero described in paradoxical terms:

A knight rides into the noon,
and his helmet points to the sun,
and a thousand splintered suns,
are the gaiety of his mail.

set in a metal mask,
betraying rags and tatters
that cling to the flesh beneath
and wear his nerves to ribbons
under the radiant casque. (CEP 138)

He has a splendid outward appearance, but it does not correspond to his real nature. His “impoverished inner self makes a mockery of his brave and public mask” (Keyes, “The Angels Chiding” 37). The splendid imagery of the opening stanza
conveys a strong visual picture of the knight's armour. His helmet pointing to the sun befits his glamorous outfit. But there is something that separates his costume—namely, the glitter and flash of his armour—from the real stuff he is made of. In this way, his costume dominates and creates his identity as a knight.

The second stanza of the poem provides an ironic contrast to the image of the knight as the speaker gives us a closer, inside view of the knight. The significant feature of this poem is that Rich imagines the exposure of male weakness as positive. Rich's attitude toward manhood or manliness as power finds its profound expression in the manly figure. By pointing to his outward show and the inner hollowness Rich makes it clear that manly power is only a costume that should be thrown away. The poem does not differentiate a false costume from a true one, but emphasizes the need to free the self from costumes altogether. In these respects, “The Knight” exposes the myth of manliness and the power associated with it, in order to suggest a reality of power beyond gender roles.

These early poems illustrate Rich’s developing insight into what it means to be a woman in patriarchal society. This insight gave her the power to fight for the powers of women in her later works. Therefore, many of the poems written in the 1950s and early 60s, namely, *A Change of World* (1951) and *The Diamond Cutters* (1955) and *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963),
provide evidence of Rich's understanding of negative features of human social relations. In each volume there are poems that reflect the power relation in the equations of the oppressor and the oppressed. At the same time there are poems that express more complicated power relations in terms of women’s complicity. These poems tell the stories they dare not express overtly at least in America in 1951. In that sense, the dormant nature of such power in her early poems is true to Rich's ultimate vision expressed in patriarchal “power-over”, a force fundamentally inimical to women. Rich, in the earlier poems, perceived power as a sinister phenomenon, a means whereby one group of human beings is able to use its relations with other human beings for its own benefit. Since all these poems exhibit a sense of stifled resistance and strategies of disguise, they provide a clear picture of woman’s negative experience of power.

Early in her life Rich seemingly observed the phenomenon of power as the capacity of powerful agents to realize their will over the will of powerless people. Thus, power is seen as a possession, something which those in power hold on to and which those who are powerless try to wrest from their control. Rich’s unique perception about women and history in general enables her to critique institutions and redefine the concept of power as such. Thus during the 1960s, “Rich ... passed through
the phases of self-analysis, individual assertion, accomplishment to rejection of patriarchal values, feminist activism, and finally to building a woman-centered community” (Martin, *An American Triptych* 168). In this process of retreat into her self, she became increasingly conscious of her power and of the power of women in general. As a result, her poetry has reflected her growing desire to define her experience for herself and to help other women to transform their lives. By the late seventies, Rich had begun to identify the denial of the feminine in civilization with the roots of inhumanity and self-destructiveness and to call for a renewal of “the feminine principle” (*OWB* 76).

When the poet is a woman influenced by male poets, as in the case of Rich, the struggle to define oneself makes one aware of strengths and limitations. It provides further evidence of the patriarchal oppression of female energies. Until she engaged in the influence struggle with other women artists, Rich knew that she would be unable to assess accurately the dimensions of the struggle for female artistic identity in poets. Rich’s struggle to free herself from male poetic influences made her acutely sensitive to male domination in the social and political spheres. Thus, Rich’s second phase of writing shows the newly assumed power in her desire to free herself from her earlier poetic mentors, most of whom were males. In order to fulfil her role as a poet Rich knew that she must throw off those influences.
This change helped her to evolve her own style of writing by shedding the influence of such poets as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams as well as the confessional mode of Robert Lowell and John Berryman. In the volumes from *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) through *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Leaflets* (1969), and *The Will to Change* (1971), to *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), and *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) Rich explored the pain and power of a creative, thinking woman in a culture that exercised power as a force denying the most essential aspects of her experience. Thus Rich redefines her concept of power by rejecting “power-as-force” and patriarchal “power-over” for the “power-to-transform”, which, for her, is the significant and essential power (*OWB* 68).

Rich's later poetry points the way toward how such a transition might occur. The purpose of her writing, Rich writes, “is to liberate women, [which] means to change thinking itself: finally to reintegrate what has been named the unconscious, the subjective, the emotional with the structural, the rational, the intellectual; ... and finally to annihilate those dichotomies” (*OWB* 81). Thus, poetry for Rich became not merely “an aesthetic rendering of experience, but ... a way of changing the world” (Martin, *An American Triptych* 169). In Rich’s claiming of such power as intrinsic to woman, she calls for a power to
liberate woman and “to create a new kind of human being” (OWB 81). As a poet, Rich has exercised this transforming power through her writings. Such power, for her, becomes “the drive / to connect. The dream of a common language” (DCL 7). Therefore, the second phase of her writings shows a new thrust in her poems with her redefined notions of power. Rich writes, “When we speak of transformation we speak more accurately out of the vision of a process which will leave neither surfaces nor depths unchanged, which enters society at the most essential level of the subjugation of women and nature by men” (LSS 248). Thus Rich makes clear her intent to change the world, as she says in her poem “Natural Resources”: “I have to cast my lot with those / who age after age, perversely,/ with no extraordinary power, / reconstitute the world” (DCL 67).

Rich’s basic shift in the understanding of power from “power-over” to “power-to transform” entails replacing the idea of static power with that of dynamic power. This understanding of dynamic power, which gives a more complete picture of the nature of situated power relationships in ongoing social relationships, is similar to that of Michel Foucault. He analyzes the inner mechanisms of power and the relationship between power, knowledge, and discourse that develops itself as progressive and emancipatory. Foucault’s view of power is directly counter to the conventional Marxist or early feminist
model of power, such as we have seen in Rich’s early writings. The latter version of power is a form of oppression or repression, what Foucault terms the “repressive hypothesis” (qtd. in Mills 36). Instead, Foucault sees power as productive, something which brings about forms of behaviour and events rather than simply curtailing freedom and constraining individuals. Power, then, is not to be understood according to “the model of a unidirectional vector from oppressor to the oppressed” (Halperin 17). Rather, “it’s a fluid, all-encompassing medium, immanent in every sort of social relation–though unevenly concentrated or distributed, to be sure, and often stabilized in its dynamics by the functioning of social institutions” (Halperin 18).

Power is therefore not “possessed” but “exercised” (Halperin 18). That means power should not be conceptualized as the property of someone who can be identified and confronted, nor should it be thought of as embedded in particular agents or institutions. Instead, power is what characterizes the complex relations among the parts of a particular society–and the interactions among individuals in that society–as relations of ongoing struggle. Power is thus a dynamic situation, whether personal, social, or institutional: it is not a force but a strategic, unstable relation. Power, for Foucault, is intrinsically relational in character; a dynamic energy to transform.
According to Foucault the assumption that power is static is involved in treating power as a thing that can be possessed by a social agent. If power is a thing that can be possessed by a social agent and if such possession is treated as an objective fact about that agent, then power is conceptualized in an essentially static manner. For Foucault power, instead, is a dynamic phenomenon, one that is always “in motion” (Wartenberg 164). To treat power as dynamic is to treat its temporal dimension as equally important as its spatial dimension. Thus Foucault conceptualized power as a “complex strategical situation,” as a “multiplicity of force relations,” as simultaneously “intentional” yet “non-subjective” (Smart 77).

Foucault argues that power is something which is performed, more like a strategy than a possession. Foucault puts it in the following way in Power / Knowledge: “Power must be analyzed as something which circulates or as something which only functions in the form of a chain... . Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (Foucault 98). First of all, Foucault conceptualized power as a process, as a chain or as a net, a system of relations spread throughout the society. And, second, individuals should not be seen simply as the recipients of power, but as the ‘place’ where power is enacted and the place where it is resisted. Thus, his theorizing of power
“reconceptualizes not only power itself but also the role that individuals play in power relations—whether they are simply subjected to oppression or whether they actively play a role in the form of their relations with others and with institutions” (Mills 36). Power, Foucault argued, exists in relationships—it has a primary location in the ongoing, habitual ways in which human beings relate to one another. When relationships rather than events become the focus of a theory of power, it becomes clear that power is not a piece of property that can simply be physically possessed by its owner. Rich understands this situated concept of power correctly and recognizes that patriarchal power over another is the result of the structure of a broad social network.

Conceptualizing power as the result of social agents' ongoing actions causes the temporal dimension of such actions to become a point of focus. Once the temporal aspect is introduced into the account of power, “power relationships are conceptualized as inherently changing and changeable aspects of society” (Wartenberg 165). Hence, power is positive and productive. It produces possibilities of action, of choice—and, ultimately, it produces the conditions for the exercise of freedom. For Rich such a conception of power must have a means for acknowledging the dynamic nature of power as a social relationship. What this means is that power relationships, if they
are to continue to exist, must constantly be reproduced by the actions of social agents. Once power is recognized as having its basis in the manner in which social agents interact with one another, its reality is seen to lie in the ongoing nature of such interactions. In effect, Rich’s purpose to create a new humanity outside the traditions shaped by patriarchal culture implies the acceptance of a dynamic power theory in the place of a static power. Thus a study that focuses upon the theme of power in her poetry takes us beyond the traditional understanding of the concept of power. This vision, intrinsic to her evolution of a female aesthetic, raises questions about what this special focus upon power implies for the development of woman’s poetry. Rich is convinced of the fact that to be a poet is to have power, not only in the creation of new forms, but in the way those new forms influence the human mind.

Rich is convinced that a transformation of relationships requires a restructuring or re-forming, a seeing again or revisioning of the concept of power. Such a shift in power involves exploring repressed experiences and new patterns of meaning. This redefined concept of power reflects itself in language in the hands of a poet. Therefore, Rich is aware of writing a poetry that will prove itself as a catalyst for social change. As she has observed: “Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language... . Poetry is above all a concentration of the power of
language, which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe” (LSS 248).

As Rich has said, “When the woman writer takes pen in hand, she has been in some way, even if in only a small way, seizing power—seizing some of that male power, that logos, and saying 'I'. Both Bradstreet and Dickinson were extremely conscious of seizing power through poetry and used language to create self-hood” (qtd. in Martin, An American Triptych 170-71). As Rich recalls her early career, she is aware of masculine use of power as a static power that separated society as active masculinity and passive femininity. But Rich’s recognition of the transformative use of power provides the means for a fundamental break with theories of power that see “power-over” as only a negative force in social relations. The concept of a transformative use of power provides a means for conceptualizing a positive use of power that shows its importance as a constitutive force in human social relations.

The poem “The Roofwalker” (SD) written in 1961 introduces the idea of transformative power as a constitutive force both in terms of its male identification and in its treatment of the self. The poem begins as a straightforward description of a group of roofers finishing up their work as night falls:

Giants, the roofwalkers,
on a listing deck, the wave
of darkness about to break
on their heads. The sky
is a torn sail where figures
pass magnified, shadows
on a burning deck. (CEP 193)

In this context, the turmoil of the roofwalker is the motivation that will lead Rich to define herself on her own terms and in alliance with other women. Though Rich may identify with men in this poem, she no longer worships maleness as power. Her portrayal of women in this volume stresses the power-to-transform. Rich knows that “if women's power to-transform is cultivated outside the sphere of male influence, the emergence of a truly different creature occurs, one unimpeded by the constraints of gender” (OWB 66). Rich says that a new poetry is beginning here, one that is distinctively female in nature and forged in women’s experience and perceptions.

Counterpoised against the power-to-control, transforming power inheres in language that is authentic, useful, and life-enhancing. “Like This Together” (NL) with seemingly disconnected fragments is such a poem. The poem’s imagery flows between those two worlds of man and woman. Its tension is built upon the possibility of connection, its urgency, the need to transform a marriage. For the most part in the poem, the relationship becomes static. The quest is for words that understand each
other: “Our words misunderstand us/ ...old detailed griefs / twitch at my dreams, and I / crawl against you, fighting / for shelter, making you / my cave” (NL 17). The prominent speaker of the poem is a strong-willed woman who corrects, speaks, and at times remains silent. In each of these actions, her will to choose assumes importance. The poem instructs that language is integral to the transformation of relationship in marriage.

In her essay “When We Dead Awaken” (1971), Rich describes transforming power as a basic function for writers and she warns them that it involves a predicament for women:

I want to make it clear that I am not saying that in order to write well, or think well, it is necessary to become unavailable to others, or to become a devouring ego.... But to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination.... There must be ways, and we will be finding out more and more about them, in which the energy of creation and the energy of relation can be united. (ARP 96)

The idea Rich presents about knowledge, ethics, and power, combined with the recurrent image of liberation, calls the writers to work for change. Rich urges them to re-examine their identity, ethics, and knowledge about both women’s past and their future.
This means searching within one’s self to understand fully what social forces have shaped one’s individuality; locating that self in the world is important in realizing its transforming power.

Thus, Rich’s endeavour takes a personal and emotional direction. What she desires for her poetry she desires as well in her personal relationships and for other women. In all instances, language holds the key to transforming power. The relationship with other women and the circumstances of her own life reinforced Rich’s poetic and social vision, a vision that includes the public and historical dimensions of female experience. Rich has broadened her ground to include the lives of all women regardless of their social status or historical context. This community of women includes “the poet, the housewife, the lesbian, the mathematician, the mother, the dishwasher, the pregnant teenager, the teacher, the grandmother, the prostitute, the philosopher, the waitress” (*ARP* 204).

In her *Necessities of Life* (1966), Rich emphasizes the same implicit connections between woman, the poet, and power. The poem “I am in Danger–Sir–” (*NL*) brings her to the recognition that Emily Dickson’s power as a poet emerged out of a desperate struggle for identity, an aspect of which was her right to use language in her own way. As a poet who explores her self and identity in her poems, Rich develops a similar consciousness and offers power to other women engaged in the project
of transformation of their lives. She meditates upon her position in many of the poems in *Necessities of Life*, and she searches in others for positive, life-affirming uses of power. However, she realizes that her creative power is inherent in her identity as woman.

These poems in this volume are the result of Rich’s attempt to locate the female principle within herself; thus it marks an important stage in her renewed understanding of power. It also reflects her growing awareness of the profound connection between private and public life. With her increased participation in various movements and her growing awareness of the responsibility of the poet, Rich attained an identity. This new perception of power helped her to evolve a sense that she can not only shape the circumstances of her own life but that she can function as a spokeswoman for those people whose lives have too often been neglected.

In *Leaflets* (1969), Rich disowns the traditional masculine power, which arbitrarily separates art and life. Asserting that poetry has the power to transform lives, Rich writes in “Implosions” (*L*), “I want to choose words that even you/ would have to be changed by” (*L* 42). *Leaflets* maps out the evolution of Rich’s personal, aesthetic, and political values in the late 1960s. Rich’s movement toward this female principle can be most clearly seen in the poems in this volume, especially in “Orion”.
Written in 1965, “Orion” exposes the predicament of a woman writer’s creative power and powerlessness. A huge and warrior-like winter constellation, Orion, who lords over the heavens from late fall to early spring, serves as an apt metaphor for Rich’s insight that power is exhilarating and visible throughout the world. Powerfulness is, therefore, a desirable condition, for it makes the invisible visible. Thus, Rich projects her own sense of power, an awareness of the male principle within herself, onto Orion. It verifies that “for a woman the animus represents her affinity with light as mind and spirit and her capacity for intellection and ego-consciousness” (ARP 137).

Orion’s energy does not exercise its power on domestic life, where Rich’s speaker feels vulnerable and powerless:

Indoors I bruise and blunder,
break faith, leave ill enough
alone, a dead child born in the dark.

Night cracks up over the chimney,
pieces of time, frozen geodes
come showering down in the grate. (L11).

The dynamic energy that she receives from Orion does not revitalize her relationships with others or with herself; thus it leaves her in anguish. Rich’s speaker can do little about her fragmentation. She is a woman, after all, and powerless. It suggests that along with re-visioning of power, Rich needs to call
into question her identity as an artist. Naturally the poetic
consciousness of Rich moves toward themes of the broader
possible scope.

Thus Rich’s style becomes increasingly experimental, the
spaces between the words as significant as the words
themselves. The gaps between the phrases suggest a groping for
understanding and the poem expresses the tension inherent in
her struggle to find language that will exemplify her growing
conviction of the interconnection of all people. Now the
significant thrust of poems is toward the female principle.

Section 5 of “Leaflets” was written during the winter and spring
of 1968, explosive months in the life of the poet. This was the
time when both she and her husband became increasingly active
in Vietnam War protests. Rich left her marriage in 1970 and
later in that year, her husband Conrad committed suicide, an
event that had its impact on her writings with daring
experiments in form and content. A speaker appears in the form
of a first person singular; and the “I” is so close to the “I” of the
poet without any pretense or mask. The poet-speaker then
addresses a “you” directly in the poem: “I want this to reach you
/ who told me once that poetry is nothing sacred / –no more
sacred that is / than other things in your life--”(L 55). Rich
perceives the value of poetry in its ability to uplift and enlighten.
Rich’s concerns become wider and her priorities cover topics such as the growing dissatisfaction with American political decisions, waste of human power and resources, unequal division of power, and the exploitation of the people. Now Rich’s focus is no more on patriarchy or the male power; she is only concerned about the female principle and humanity in general. This disturbing yet productive phase also marks Rich’s first use of the ghazal as a poetic form. Comprising the third and final section of the volume, the “Ghazals; Homage to Ghalib” are based upon the female principle as the location of transforming power. This section also evokes the dislocation created by the social and political crises of the decade. On the home front there were the clashes of the civil rights movement and abroad the spirit of the Vietnam War. Thus, this section documents the political upheavals of the 1960s: the turmoil of the Vietnam War, the revolt in Algeria, the student revolutions in France and the United States. Rich’s use of the ghazal form underscores the theme of power as it is handled in *Leaflets*. In this new way of writing Rich searches for new sources of power in the particular context of the social and political upheaval of the sixties. This awareness of the new sources of power led her to make certain assumptions about change and about the poet’s power.
The Will to Change (1971) articulates the influence of Charles Olson and the dictum in his poem “The Kingfishers”: “What does not change / is the will to change”. Like Olson, “change” in Rich’s The Will to Change means transformation that has an impact on the lives of other people. The poems in The Will to Change explore women’s efforts to define their own identity and power in patriarchal society. This volume also reflects Rich’s decision to change her personal life in the light of the events in her life, namely, the desolation of her marriage and the tragic death of her husband. The changes Rich allude to in her title involve the integration of the power of poet with that of woman.

In the process of restructuring her mind, The Will to Change marks Rich as a political poet in her choice of both subject matter and in the themes of power. Her involvement in civil rights and antiwar demonstrations in the late sixties gave her the courage to assume the role of an activist. As a part of that she taught in a wide range of settings, from the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) programme at City College of New York (1968) to Douglass College of Rutgers University (1976-1979), Cornell (1981-1987), and Stanford (1986-1993). Through her active engagement in teaching, Rich translated her will to change into action. Her volunteered attempt to teach language in the SEEK open admission program had far reaching effects as it opened wider vistas to those people
who are not ordinarily allowed access to higher education. This is a part of the restructuring of the mind envisioned in *The Will to Change*. In her essay “Teaching Language in Open Admissions (1972) Rich writes:

language is power, and ... those who suffer from injustice most are the least able to articulate their suffering; and ... the silent majority, if released into language, would not be content with a perpetuation of the conditions which have betrayed them. But this notion hangs on a special conception of what it means to be released into language: not simply learning the jargon of an elite, fitting unexceptionably into the status quo, but learning that language can be used as a means of changing reality. (*LSS 67*)

For a writer, language is power and is a life-enhancing human activity. The poetic vocation is a call to make sure that justice is being done for those who have been silenced. Moreover, Rich's poetic sensibility extends quite naturally into the political sphere seeking to ensure personal liberty and freedom from oppression. Politically and personally Rich considers that “the jargon of an elite” is detrimental to transformation. In an interview Rich said, “I was thinking very much about our failures, the map of our failures, we who consider ourselves so possessed of language, so articulate” (*ARPP 268*). Thus, Rich
prefers a common language in her poetry in order to make it accessible to all and to make women realize their power. Rich possesses the power-to-transform and would like to transmit this energy from herself to her audience.

Since *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) Adrienne Rich has showed her concerns with women and the efforts to compose a woman-centred poetry. In “I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus” (*WC*), a modern reworking of the myth of Orpheus in the netherworld, these concerns have evolved to a source of alliance and dialogue between speaker and readers. Rich’s sense of her own power as a poet is reinforced in this poem. Rich’s poem places the myth of Orpheus in the context of a modern reversal of power: “I am a woman in the prime of life, with certain powers / and those powers severely limited / by authorities whose faces I rarely see” (*CEP* 367). Just as Orpheus in the myth was ordered to behave in a certain fashion by the gods of the underworld, so too Rich’s heroic female is “severely limited / by authorities whose faces I rarely see” (*CEP* 367). By showing the potential of power “Rich has recovered something of the function of the poet among his people: not by transmitting their legends and tales but by offering herself without pretensions, with honest hesitations as the mirror of their consciousness and the medium of their transformation” (Gelpi 296-97).
Rich’s fascination with power is expressed by metaphors like “A woman with nerves of a panther / a woman with contacts among Hell’s Angels / a woman feeling the fullness of her powers” (CEP 367). Those metaphorical definitions that tell what kind of woman she is, are juxtaposed forming a chaotic universe in which the persona lives. There is firmness in her actions: she faces the authorities, she has this certain mission. In sum, she feels her female powers as if the poem itself were a celebration of the discovery of these powers. Throughout her writings Rich has created individual portraits of unnamed women who have collectively made history. They are ordinary women who have carried out the ordinary, day-to-day activities necessary to sustain life. Rich’s identification and the celebration of their neglected life in her poems show her new awareness of the power of women in community.

Rich’s awareness of this sense of community was further fostered in her by the second stage of the women’s movement. Accepting the National Book Award for *Diving into the Wreck* in 1974, along with Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, two other nominees, Rich expressed her solidarity with the community of women. Primarily, Rich wants to develop in other women a sense of womanly power different from the kind of power that she herself experienced in her early stage of writing. This
womanly power is transformative in the sense that it has the potential to change the different roles of women in the society.

In “Trying to Talk with a Man,” the opening poem in *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) Rich begins to develop her idea of a womanly power as distinct from masculine power. It establishes the connection between private and public life. The cultural and the political climate of the nuclear age provides Rich with metaphors for the relationship between a man and a woman. For the woman, power exists in the connection between her physical being and the natural world. In the first line of the poem, the woman’s state of feeling breaks into the external reality of the narrative: “Out in this desert we are testing bombs, / that's why we came here” (*DW* 3). And at the end of the poem the speaker shows the extent of the vulnerability that arises out of such a communion: “Out here I feel more helpless / with you than without you” (*DW* 3). The poetic consciousness in poems like this seeks not to assume man's power, but to develop a wholly different way of being in the world. To that end, Rich composes poems with a female audience in her mind.

“When We Dead Awaken,” parts of “Waking in the Dark,” “Incipience,” “After Twenty Years,” “The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen as One,” “The Phenomenology of Anger” and the title poem “Diving into the Wreck” are some of the poems in *Diving into the Wreck* written for a female audience. The tone in
these poems is determined in large part by Rich's speaking to other women. The “you”, Rich’s imagined audience in most of these poems, is a woman who has not awakened yet to the truths known to Rich's speaker. Thus, Rich uses images of women in these poems to suggest that women must recreate themselves, using their traditional powers. Rich's aesthetic values the separation of woman from the power of man. She speaks of that separation that reinforces the power of women:

The pact that we made was the ordinary pact
of men & women in those days
I don’t know who we thought we were
that our personalities
could resist the failures of the race. (DW 50)

Here Rich addresses a female audience and handles the notion of transforming power with more immediacy.

In the poem “Planetarium” (WC), written during the space race years that took men to the moon, Rich identifies the female models of energizing and transforming power such as Caroline Herschel. Rich says that this poem was inspired by an actual visit to a planetarium in 1968 where Rich first came to know that there had been women astronomers and heard particularly about Herschel. Rich's theme in this poem is that of powerlessness versus power. Caroline Herschel was an
astronomer who discovered eight comets in her ninety-eight years of life. The first half of the poem gives a vivid description of Herschel’s achievements in the male world of astronomy. As Rich emphasizes the fact of Herschel’s womanhood and her female audience, the poem presents Herschel as a model of female power to influence. In the second half of the poem Rich identifies with Herschel using images from astronomy and her own past as a poet. By reviving the neglected or forgotten life of Herschel in her writing, Rich rediscovered women’s history and culture, particularly women’s communities that have nurtured female creativity. By identifying with Herschel, Rich realizes the split of her own identity and the power of woman. At the end of the poem, Rich achieves integration when she experiences herself as “an instrument in the shape of a woman / trying to translate pulsations into images / for the relief of the body / and the reconstruction of the mind” (PSN 146). It suggests her own power as a poet and the power of other women to transform the world.

Four years later, in 1971, in her essay “The Antifeminist Woman”, Rich writes about the issue of the split of her own identity: “It is easy to say we cannot ever know what is truly male or truly female. There is much we can know. We do know that these principles have been split apart and set in antagonism within each of us by a male-dominated intellectual and political heritage” (LSS 78). Thus, Rich’s task is to bring about the relief
of the body and the reconstruction of the mind. In “Planetarium” (WC) Rich overcomes that split by depicting a woman like Herschel. It makes sense to think of balancing the masculine power-to-control with the coming into consciousness of the female power-to-transform.

In the poem “Diving into the Wreck” two kinds of power merge. The speaker’s first enterprise is to read the book of myths, perhaps as a necessary background for the adventure to come. The poem works as if the persona were assuring her readers of the seriousness of her pursuit. Rich who constantly defines masculinity as “power-over” sees the sea as a feminine element and visualizes it with the power to transform:

the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element. (DW 23)

In the poem, the persona is immersed in the ocean, without perceiving its limits; this could mean that the persona is unable to name its perils and potentialities. Here at this point, the ocean, filled with the unknown, impending perils, is the uncontrolled medium that takes the diver to his / her objective: the wreck. As Rich’s speaker goes down, the ocean becomes darker and the purpose of the journey is clearly revealed.
Although the diver says, “it is easy to forget / what I came for,” the original purpose of the enterprise holds: “I came to explore the wreck” (DW 23). Thus, the speaker maintains the same kind of mind-set so evident at the beginning of the poem.

The words are purposes.

The words are maps.

I came to see the damage that was done

and the treasures that prevail.

I stroke the beam of my lamp

slowly along the flank

of something more permanent

than fish or weed

the thing I came for:

the wreck and not the story of the wreck

the thing itself and not the myth. (DW 23)

The objective is to look at “the damage that was done”. Thus, “the thing itself” i.e., “the wreck” focuses not on myths or histories about the wreck, but on “the evidence of damage” (DW 24). In this sense, the speaker’s search ends with the discovery:

This is the place.

And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body

We circle silently

about the wreck

we dive into the hold.

I am she: I am he. (24)

The union of the masculine and the feminine becomes the major action of the poem. When the diver finally arrives at the wreck, the persona's essence is revealed. The speaker is an androgynous figure. Through this androgyny Rich finds a way to reestablish the desired harmony that existed before the wreck. Kevin Stein remarks that the poem's diver “seeks nothing less than an understanding of the cultural battle and of how its history has determined the way men and women view their respective societal roles …. Rich's diver desires to find the words that compose the vocabulary of power and thus control its means of distribution” (DW 39). Thus Rich articulates her need for a womanly power to counter the insanity of the nuclear age, a power that allows her to become the survivor she is. Rich's poetic energy flows toward the life-enhancing direction she sees in women.

In her *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) Rich asserts a different sort of vision based on what is “common” in and to women. She defines “common” as: “the interaction of
oppression and strength, damage and beauty” (LSS 255). For Rich, “the poet is a woman speaking to other women and her ‘dream of a common language’ is emblematic of her desire to address that audience” (Keyes, *The Aesthetics of Power* 159). As Rich explains, “the point ... is not the ‘exclusion’ of men; it is that primary presence of women to ourselves and each other...” (LSS 249). Rich says that to be “extraordinary” or “uncommon” in women is to fail (LSS 255). Here Rich observes that throughout history strong women have been censured for independent thought or action: “History has been embellished with ‘extraordinary’ or ‘uncommon’ and of course ‘token’ women whose lives have left the rest unchanged” (LSS 256). In the poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” Rich cites the examples of such extraordinary women.

Rich, however, sees herself clearly as an ordinary woman with tremendous social conscience and sense of destiny as a poet. Her dream or ultimate goal is to use her gifts to forge connections. She wants to change the course of poetry itself by admitting a female aesthetics (Boland, “Reading Adrienne Rich” 65). For Rich such an aesthetics is based upon womanly power. She does not mean “the old patriarchal power-over but the power to create, power to think, power-to-articulate and concretize our visions and transform our lives and those of our children” (LSS 271). Rich states that unless a woman re-examines what she has
learned and uses these gifts to expand her knowledge of the female being, she will continue to fall prey to enforced ignorance, the crucial key to her powerlessness. The confidence that comes with the wisdom of knowing and understanding one’s past, culture, community, and female self will allow a woman to progress into a state of freedom. Exploring women’s history through criticism and analysis, Rich shows the power for transformation of women’s lives through connections made among women.

The quest for transformation continues with “Power”, a poem about Marie Curie. In the first group of poems in *The Dream of a Common Language* Rich explores the issues of women and power exposing her obsession with the deaths of women like Marie Curie, Elvira Shatayev, and some women mountain climbers. A famous woman like Marie Curie had power, yet her scientific discovery of radium killed her. In effect, Rich sees the danger involved in the kind of power available to an uncommon woman. By the end of the book, however, Rich moves toward a more positive definition of power and “a whole new poetry beginning here” (*CEP* 76). Central to Rich’s poetics is a womanly power in which she believes that “Vision begins to happen” (*CEP* 76). Clearly, making such a connection would be an action of empowering; otherwise, her wounds cancel her power. Besides
killing Marie Curie, that achievement is insufficient if all it does is enhance the reputation of one woman.

The second poem in *The Dream of a Common Language*—“Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev”—concerns the actions of a group of women, a climbing team, all of whom died in a storm on Lenin Peak in August 1974. The prophetic kind of voice in the poem comes from Elvira Shatayev, the team leader, who speaks to her husband, imagines his finding and burying the women's bodies, and addresses the issue of morality. Rich presents a more fully realized vision of women in a cooperative, sustaining relationship that requires the unity of love and power. Though the group failed to reach their goal, Rich celebrates their attempt as a potential possibility for the community of women. The women’s experience of acting together, supporting each other, and accomplishing together becomes a model for the community of women. As counterpoint, “Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev” parallels the theme of “Power” but forms a contrast in that the drive to power is communal, not singular as in Marie Curie’s case (Keyes, *Aesthetics of Power* 167). Rich draws the lesson that women have to take their power and use it to transform the boundaries of relationships in society.

In “Sibling Mysteries” (*DCL*) Rich gives glimpses of ordinary women during pre-patriarchal times, a time when she imagines women were strong and experienced positive bonds with each
other. She juxtaposes images of strength and connectedness with images of separation, that of her estrangement from both her mother and sister. In the poem’s present time Rich effects a reconciliation with her sister. The poem suggests that this reconciliation is made possible partly through an understanding of women’s original strength and rapport with each other. This knowledge makes Rich and her sister acknowledge and affirm their early bonds with their mother and finally with each other. The positive images of women in pre-patriarchal history reclaim history and reassure Rich and her audience that women are potentially strong. Rich presents these images to suggest that women’s intuitive knowledge and potential power in community are the sources of their power. The uses of “we” in relating women’s pre-patriarchal history show women’s solidarity and power for Rich and her audience. Rich views her experiences with her mother and sister in a mythical and historical context that includes all women. Thus the female audience and celebration of female experience imagined in this poem bring the female power into reality.

“From an Old House in America” (UP), set in the Vermont farmhouse where Rich spends her summers, tells the history of American women. The poem has been executed through the moves back and forth between the present and the evocations of the poet’s past and the past of other women who lived in the
house. Rich recalls this history to understand how it has conditioned her own experience and that of all American women. As she recounts history, she is aware of the destructive division of power that constricted the lives of most women, but she makes an attempt to reconstruct history imaginatively to bring female energies back. The reconstruction of the history of American women is painful for Rich because she must fight her desire to be oblivious of the past and dissociate herself from the pain of the community of women. Thus she feels her solidarity with other women in the final line of the poem: “Any woman’s death diminishes me” (ARPP 72). In doing so Rich reaffirms her identity and connection: “I am an American woman” (ARPP 66). This is a pledge of solidarity with American women to work for the transformation of the social order. Rich has positive faith in the community of women and affirms that women should realize their power to work for the same goal (Whelchel 65).

In Rich’s *The Dream of a Common Language* the love of women for one another is more generative and productive for Rich than heterosexual love because it leads her to a new language. Thus, the self-sacrificing love traditionally expected of women as wives and mothers is united with power. The self-affirmation and sense of achievement that each woman experiences can take place only in a community. Rich envisions an ideal order of society based on the value of woman with the
fullness of her powers. An ideal society would be predicated on women. As Paula Becker says in “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff,” “we’d bring, against all odds, our full power / to every subject. Hold back nothing / because we were women” (DCL 44). Many poems from Diving into the Wreck—namely “Incipience,” “After Twenty Years,” and “Walking in the Dark”—present images of a slowly evolving women’s community through their struggle to create new female roles in the society.

The “Twenty-One Love Poems” in The Dream of a Common Language declares one woman’s love for another woman and they transcend sex. The poems assert Rich’s preference for women in positions of power and extend her vision of women’s capabilities. This same vision for women finds expression in “Not Somewhere Else, But Here,” the third section of The Dream of a Common Language. Poems such as “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff,” “Sibling Mysteries,” the elegiac poem “A Woman Dead in Her Forties,” “Mother-Right,” “Natural Resources and Transcendental Etude” articulate the womanly voice the poet has been developing throughout her work. Rich celebrates the life of the individual women and sets their lives as models and inspiration for the community of women. As she restores and validates the experience of unnamed women who have collectively made history, she looks at their lives to understand
how power in their lives transformed them and the historical period in which they lived (Whelchel 69).

The Dream of a Common Language therefore brings her quest for power to its culmination in the realization of the concept of power to transform. At the root of this power is the development of a common language for women that has nothing to do with specific words or sentence patterns, but with language as a system for a woman-centred world. For Rich poetry is the vehicle for this common language. She believes that “Poetry is ... the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe. It is as if forces we can lay claim to in no other way become present to us in sensuous form” (LSS 248). For her “there is nothing more unnerving and yet empowering than the making of connections” (LSS 255). Poems therefore become a means for “the drive to connect” and they demonstrate the capacity for making connections through the sensuous form of language (DCL 7). For this reason, Rich uses her tools and privileges to examine her morals and ethics, clearly defining who she is and what her goals are in order to create a bond leading to liberation. If the lives of uncommon women have left the rest of women’s lives unchanged, Rich’s vision in this instance does not remain a mere dream. Rich’s poetry addresses the issues of womanly power and its potential to transform personal relationships.
Since a central use of the concept of power is precisely that of characterizing such relationships, it is important for Rich to provide a clear understanding of power. The “new kind of poetry beginning here” (DCL 76) has emerged from Rich’s commitment to women. Thus, Rich’s transformative use of power has broader significance, and it is clear from the context within which it was developed. In particular, the idea of a transformative use of power refers to an aspect of power that has not received adequate recognition within social theory in general. Rich’s work allows us to see that not all uses of power have a negative and alienating effect upon the one over whom power is used. Indeed, it allows us to see that power is a necessary and positive feature of social relations that allows human beings to attain a degree of sovereignty and control over their lives. By articulating the distinction between a dominating and a transformative use of power, Foucault sheds light on Rich’s meditations on the growth of power in modern society.

It is important to realize that transformative power does not constitute a distinctive type of power. Rather, transformative power is a specific use of those types of power, constituted by the desire to empower the agent over whom it is exercised. Because of its distinctive aim, transformative power has different characteristics from power used to dominate other social agents. Like Foucault, Rich believes that a transformative use of power,
although it involves exercising power over a social agent, seeks to empower that agent by developing that agent’s capabilities more fully. Rich’s conception of power has, for the most part, achieved its insights into the transformative use of power by focusing upon women’s role. Thus her poetry opts for a female audience, for poems about women, and for a common language, one that will connect women. Rich wants to convert the world through women’s power-to-transform. This awareness only forces her to conceive new notions of power and new possibilities for women that have profound impact on society.

In this process, beginning with the imitation of the male writers, Rich evolved her own unique style in her writing. Rich’s concept of power—power to transform—finds its fulfilment in the ideal of the dream of a common language and continues thereafter. She writes that “the necessity of poetry has to be stated over and over, but only to those who have reason to fear its power, or those who still believe that language is ‘only words’ and that an old language is good enough for our descriptions of the world we are trying to transform” (LSS 147). For Rich, language is not merely words but rather words endowed with connecting power. In her writings, Rich bridges the boundaries that separate words, things, and women from one another.

As poet and activist, Rich views the patriarchal structures of society as the basis of oppression and has accepted the issues
of women as her major concern. In her critique of power, Rich analyzes how the energies of women can be brought to focus for the possibilities of beneficent female power and how an awareness of the states of powerlessness can equip them to forge a new definition of power. Here Rich articulates her vision and promotes others toward its realization, bringing a woman-centered world into focus, challenging the contemporary society and its notion of power. In that sense, Rich lends new meaning to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s proclamation: “the poet is no mere versifier but a seer and sayer” (Emerson xviii).