CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In *A Miscellany of Men*, a collection of random comments on subjects that range from literature to philosophy, history to social criticism, G.K. Chesterton writes:

Whenever you hear much of things being unutterable and indefinable and impalpable and unnamable and subtly indescribable, then elevate your aristocratic nose towards heaven and snuff up the smell of decay. It is perfectly true that there is something in all good things that is beyond all speech or figure of speech. But it is also true that there is in all good things a perpetual desire for expression and concrete embodiment; and though the attempt to embody it is always inadequate, the attempt is always made. If the idea does not seek to be the word, the chances are that it is an evil idea. If the word is not made flesh, it is a bad word. (174)

The word that speaks from the depths of primal desire and the knowledge that comes from the embodied experience are, as Chesterton remarks, inextricable from the language in which they are spoken, thought, imagined, and dreamed. In the
beginning, by His word God spoke things into existence: “And the Word became flesh” (Jn. 1:14). The things God spoke into existence were direct, specific and concrete. They were, in short, materially embodied and materially related to one another. And God looked at what he had made and declared it to be very good.

Years later, through the deconstruction of that world and, to some degree, the deconstruction of man himself, modern man altered this equation radically and his relations with nature have become indirect. The old immediateness has been lost. In man’s abstract and formalized language, nature has lost all concreteness. Having become inorganic and technical, man has lost the quality of real experience. Abstracted or distanced from his old direct relationship with the natural order, man has abstracted himself from his own human nature and language. Words can symbolize genuine thought or, alternatively, even words can substitute for thoughts in their absence. The most alarming feature of such language is that, by abstracting from the concrete we also abstract from the limits within which we must live our lives. Then, indeed, language is more than a means of communication, not merely a lifeless vehicle for conveying ideas.

Language brings into play an entire range of experience and attitudes toward life. Furthermore, language is a potent symbolic issue because it links power and political claims of
ownership with psychological demands and cultural identity for the groups. The phenomenon of political correctness, embodied in correct speech, bears witness to the power of words to influence the course of events. As English columnist Roger Scruton has observed, “If you want to control the world, first control language; such has been the unspoken maxim of revolutionary politics in our century” (5). Those seeking power today recognize clearly that a politics of power necessarily entails a politics of language as well.

This was true with regard to the early stages of the American cold war era, from 1945 to the early 1960s, where “the dangers of intention and affectivity, the threat of emotion and confession were often linked to national consensus about American political and cultural values” (Davidson 5). It was indeed a time of effervescence in America. Values and ideas were being reassessed, conventions were being broken and age-old traditions and customs were being questioned. Youth was agitated and intolerant in its demand for answers. The young no longer felt it essential to conform to the norms of the society. However, with the disintegration of traditional norms and values something positive arose—a consolidated effort to redefine the relationship of the individual and his cultural environment. One such constructive movement was to assist the contemporary woman in establishing her identity not only as a role-defined
social function but rather as an individual functioning creatively and productively within society. Women were beginning to question their roles, their functions, their attitudes and their behaviour. They decided it was time they released themselves from their age-old bondage to tradition and demanded that the repressive ideal of women represented by Coventry Patmore in “The Angel in the House” be invalidated, that women be valued as human beings instead of simply as wives, mothers, daughters and caretakers of men.

Born on 16 May 1929 in Baltimore, Maryland, the elder of the two daughters of Arnold Rich, a doctor and pathology professor at Johns Hopkins University, and Helen Jones Rich, a gifted pianist and composer, Adrienne Rich belonged to such a background. Rich was more privileged than most women of that time because she was encouraged, instead of being restricted, both by her father and later by her husband, to write. Being aware of the dangers of such abstractions prevalent at that time, Rich, who defined herself as “a writer, a teacher, an editor-publisher, a pamphleteer, a lecturer, a sometimes-activist” and, most of all, a poet (BBP vii), engages directly in the struggle to release herself from an abstracting, colonizing language. This dualistic language splits mind from body and tames and disembodies both poetry and perception. This kind of abstraction, Rich feels, violates the integrity and meanings of its
speakers, makes voiceless its underprivileged users and disintegrates identity and coherence—whether of individuals, groups, races or whole cultures.

Rich captured these important personal and cultural moments in her poetry. She worked hard to create poetry and a language “hewn from the commonest living substance” which would reach out to others, which would allow her a means to release her own passion into language, and so to come up with an activist determination for radical change (FD: Selected Poems 1950-2001, xv). Poetic language, by its self-conscious emphasis on its contingent nature and by its formal manipulation, offered “asbestos gloves,” as Rich called them, to deal with materials too hot to handle (ARPP 171). In an interview with David Montenegro, talking about the language abstractions and the dangers involved in it, Rich said: “[In the process of abstractions] we may ourselves lose the truth behind it, the concreteness behind it, besides not being able to communicate that to someone about it. There has to be abstraction, but we may have to keep coming back to the concrete again” (Montenegro 15). Her poetry and prose collections brilliantly explore the concreteness and model, the connections between language, textuality, women, and cultures.

Rich’s works have achieved international recognition and have been translated into German, Spanish, Swedish, Dutch,
Hebrew, Greek, Italian, and Japanese. In what can only be called the most distinguished of careers, Rich has, from her earliest to latest publications, garnered awards and fellowship support. She has received the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Lenore Marshall/Nation Prize for Poetry, the Fund for Human Dignity Award of the National Gay Task Force, the Ridgely Torrence Memorial Award for the Poetry Society of America, the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Poetry, Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America, the National Poetry Association Award for Distinguished Service to the Art of Poetry, the Elmer Holmes Bobst Award in Arts and Letters, the Commonwealth Award in Literature, Academy of American Poets Fellowship, the William Whitehead Award for Lifetime Achievement, the Lambda Book Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Poetry, the National Book Award, the Poet’s Prize, the MacArthur Fellowship, the Dorothea Tanning Prize of the Academy of American Poets, the Lannan Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award, and, most recently, the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry (2004).

Rich has 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). She has received honorary doctorates from
Wheaton College (1967), Smith College (1979), College of Wooster, Ohio (1987), Brandeis (1987), City College of New York (1990), Harvard (1990), and Swarthmore (1992). An awareness of the extraordinary number of the distinguished awards she has received and the teaching positions she has held is important for appreciating, contextualizing, and assessing Rich's position as America's most widely read poet.

Rich graduated from Radcliffe College in 1951, and in the same year W. H. Auden chose *A Change of World* for the Yale Younger Poets series. Over the years, hers has become one of the most eloquent, provocative voices on the politics of sexuality, race, language, power, and culture. With orderly rhymes, iambic metres, and structured stanzas, the poems in *A Change of World* (1951) pose the question of an unstated rebellion beneath the genteel surface of civilized life and hint at the static position expected of women in patriarchy. *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955) explores an artist's or a woman's need for distance if she is to hold on to her sense of the ideal. *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) arguably was the point at which Rich's poetry changed dramatically and talked about history, domesticity, family and women's writing. *Necessities of Life* (1966) examines women's life in society, coming to terms with nature and death. *Leaflets* (1969) deals with women, language, and human relationships in the society. *The Will to Change*
(1971) imagines women's roles and pursues the role of language in constructing a woman's subjectivity. *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) considers the reflections on women's personal and collective histories and myths.

Rich's collections of essays also investigate these issues. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) Rich conceptualizes women's place within patriarchy by exploring motherhood as both a relationship and an institution. In *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (1978) Rich contemplates the communication gaps between women and women and, between women and men. Her prose work *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (1979) articulates the patriarchal constraints on women's speaking and writing by examining Rich's own growth as a lesbian-feminist poet, her awareness of other women writers, her experiences with open admissions and pedagogy, her attempts to come to terms with racism, and, of course, her concept of women writing. *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981* (1981) is a collection that shows both a deep knowledge of her subject, women, and a fine mastery of her craft in contemporary poetry. It continues to celebrate the accomplishments of women, extraordinary and ordinary, in an effort to create positive, public female images. In *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986) Rich speaks of the land itself, the cities, and of the imaginations that have


Her prose work *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (2001) looks to create poetry that pushes the boundaries of meaning, poetry that has the power to subvert—poetry that reaches beyond the self to connect with a wider community. *Arts of the Possible* consists of talks, interviews and essays written for specific occasions over a thirty year period. Here we find the evolution of Rich's thinking about poetry, about
the relationship of poetry and politics, the poet as activist, and, not least, about her commitment to personal change. In her *Fox: Poems 1998-2000* (2001) Rich calibrates the public and private history with personal memory. Meditations on distant relationships, political turmoil, notions of happiness interact with longer sequences containing greater historical sweep. *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000-2004* (2004), Rich’s most recent volume, continues with her earlier concerns, and as such is not an attempt to produce an individual masterpiece but way-stations in an ongoing engagement with poetic language and culture.

Looking back at these collections of five decades, Rich admits that it was first through reading and listening to others in English—Blake, Keats, Longfellow, Robert Louis Stevenson, Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, the King James version of the Bible—that she knew that such a possibility existed (*FD: Selected Poems 1950-2001*, xvi). For Rich, writing poetry absorbs “the rhythms of everyday sayings and rhymes and narration, songs sung at the living-room piano, my parents’ Southern tonalities, African American talk, and speeches on the radio during World War II”; above all, it involves a willingness to let the unconscious speak (*FD: Selected Poems 1950-2001*, xvi). So the writing process involves listening and watching for significant images, to give voice to the inner whisperings, to reach deep interior for those
subtle intuitions, sensations, images, which can be released from the unconscious mind through the creative art of writing. Poetry offered, as Richard Wilbur said, a “defensible retreat into indefensible positions,” a linguistic suburb where tensions outside the poem were safely managed within a domesticated verbal realm (qtd. in Davidson 5). In this way, Rich comes to know her deeper self below the surface of the words.

Rich herself explains how her poetry serves this type of explorations when she says: “Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language. In setting words together in new configurations, in the mere, immense shift from male to female pronouns, in the relationships between words created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme, it lets us hear and see our words in a new dimension” (LSS 248). Poetry can be a means to access suppressed recognitions, a way to explore difficult understandings which might otherwise be buffeted out of consciousness through the fear-laden processes of repression—through avoidance, denial, forgetting. She identifies here the impulse to politics and protest as emerging from unconscious desires. The transformation of such desires into language and action becomes an underlying theme, and her poetry gives voice to a deep longing for moving words rather than words which fail to recognize, understand or articulate the meanings of its users.
Rich writes in *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993): “I have never believed that poetry is an escape from history, and I do not think that it is more, or less, than food, shelter, health, education, decent working conditions” (xiv). For Rich the site for questioning that history of experience, for evaluating the impositions and alienations as the outcome of domination, is what constitutes her poetry and her identity as a poet. Throughout these five decades of her writing, Rich interpreted and re-interpreted the contradictory social realities and critically evaluated the workings of power in the society—not only the possessive, exploitative power but also the power to transform, to create, to bring forth life in fullness. From such embodied word, Rich knows, a new outlook may be created, different perceptions may be given value, and new ideas may spring into focus resulting in change in the culture and the society. However, this passion for change that comes out of embodied experience is, in Rich’s work, inseparable from the language. It is a theme which recurs throughout Rich’s work to date—the concrete needs, the passionate urgency of desires, and the intensity of women’s diverse struggles. These issues are identified in the continuous process of writing and are always to be held up to question.

nothing for granted, keeping a continual vigil against taking anything presumed to be true at its face value, Rich constantly questions the premises of her own thought, working critically with the language she uses. Language is sometimes characterized as reflective, but it is not a neutral mirror for an objective reality. For Rich, language, if it is to effect social and political change, must be active. This notion has been formulated most succinctly by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, where he says, “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life... the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, a specific way of doing things in the world” (qtd. in Arrington 108). Here he shows how words can also be deeds, and meaning of a language involves the creative understanding of its associated form of life and culture.

Rich emphasizes the creative capacity of language, its ability to help shape our conceptions of self and of the world. Language is influential in shaping the way we organize and understand reality. If categories of language do indeed shape our experience, then perhaps by changing the perceptions on language we could ultimately change social structures. She argues that language, rather than being a neutral vehicle that communicates already-formed ideas, works instead to shape our ideas about the world. Moreover, language is a useful strategic tool for operation within an oppressive culture. This understanding accords Rich’s enterprise some strategic value.
and maintains that language plays a powerful role in shaping human perceptions of reality.

Language has been a profound concern for critics and theorists. Many attempts have been made to bring such concerns into theoretical frameworks. Using texts authored by women, most feminists have argued that women are disempowered by language. Poststructuralist feminists and theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous expressed their skepticism about representation and the adequacies of any language to inscribe the ideas of women. They articulated an anxiety of language that marks the texts by many women writers and theorists. Therefore, many comparative studies have been conducted on Mary Daly, Margaret Atwood, Susan Griffin, Beverly Dahlen, Margaret Homans, Alicia Ostricker, Mae Henderson and Adrienne Rich who share the same concerns and issues in their writings. Rich’s works have also been studied in relation with that of her contemporaries like John Ashbery, Charles Wright, and Jorie Graham.

In research relating to Rich, issues like socially relevant thematic concerns, critical race theory, identity, and women’s contribution to the literary tradition leading to feminist criticism assume importance. Earlier research on these issues has caused us to wonder as to how Rich’s writings might endure critical scrutiny from a cultural study perspective with a main focus on language as a means for social change. Pointing out issues and
concerns of women in a culturally complex situation, her writings provide illustrations as to how language can be liberative. Rich’s attention to such function of language is inextricably related to her creative acumen, and this sharp focus on language gives her confidence in the power of language to help liberate women from oppressive circumstances. But this is still an unexplored area; the evolution of Rich’s aesthetics as well as her view of language being capable of contributing to community ethic is thus a fresh subject for a researcher to carry out a systematic investigation. By focusing on the significance of critical thinking in poetry, its transformative power can be enhanced. Therefore this research identifies and describes themes and issues found in the works of Rich and relevant to the area of this study.

In “Aesthetics and Politics of Language in Adrienne Rich” I have concentrated on Rich’s aesthetics which she developed through the conscious imitation of a style and stance of the male writers of her time, and on her enterprise of examining and critiquing language for the liberation of women. I have developed my argument in six chapters. The first chapter introduces the topic as well as the poet, giving a brief account of the works of Rich and her context. The second chapter “An Aesthetics in Process: From Imitation to Mastery” focuses on Rich’s aesthetics as a product of process. A linear progression could be traced in her writings, starting with the imitation of male poets of her time
and ending with a unique radical style of her own. The primary struggle of the young poet Rich against the old masters is reflected in her newly assumed identity as a radical poet. Nevertheless, she throws off this “anxiety of influence,” in Harold Bloom’s phrase, through the exploration of various aspects of her self and identity.

The third chapter “Exploration of Self: Quest for a Poetic and Linguistic Identity” explores the textual contours of subjectivity in the writings of Rich that bring into being a self that she calls “I”. She maps the exploration of her self through aesthetic, philosophical and existential concerns. In the prose, Rich concentrates on various aspects of her identity, namely, lesbian, Jew, mother, white woman and poet. This focus on her identity allows her to engage with the various silenced or suppressed or denied parts of her self, so as to achieve a broad and deep personal base for her political and cultural values. The “I” that appears in the poetry is no less speculative than the one that is in the prose. This lyrical “I” concentrates on the questions and answers of the notion of her identity. Thus, the consolidated aspects of her identity give her a clear imaginative concept of the power of the poet and the power of woman.

The fourth chapter “Rich in Her Contexts: A Critique of Power” focuses on the subversive undercurrents of power. Rich continually defines and redefines her concept of power until she can reject power-as-force (patriarchal power) for the power-to-
transform. Rich’s concept of transforming power, the energy of creation, shapes her development of a female aesthetic. We can observe in a survey of her poetry the difficult process by which the woman poet Rich moves toward a new understanding of the power of the poet and the power of woman. Naturally, the political and cultural climate of post World War II America conditioned her process. Thus, we can achieve an awareness of how such contemporary issues as the cultural revolution of the sixties at the background of the cold war, the civil rights movements and the Vietnam War affected Rich. Attention to these issues reveals as much about the social situation as about the poet. Michel Foucault’s specific ideas which are relevant to Rich and her later conceived notion of transformative power are delineated through the analysis of selected poems that celebrate the lives of women unravelling the contexts and circumstances under which they were written. In effect, Rich’s poetry which constitutes an indictment of the power structures ensures a ‘drive to connect’ visualizing a new world order.

The fifth chapter “The Dream’ and ‘The Drive’: Metaphor of Liminal Space and Liberation” analyses how the dream of a common language becomes a drive to connect to the collective subjectivity of women. Rich is aware of the politics of language—an all-pervading power of language to manipulate and to victimize, and the power to build and create. In response to this challenge, Rich dreamed of a common language. It is not an
attempt to re-invent language from scratch but figuring out a new time-aesthetic that embodies an alternative poetics. This strategy, in Lacanian understanding, serves as Rich’s efforts to resist the patriarchal language, what Lacan calls “the master’s discourse”. In Rich’s hands, the same discourse with certain nuances seems to be the necessary condition for liberating the human subject from both psycholinguistic and material oppression.

The issues presented in this dissertation highlight Rich’s aesthetic strategy and the underlying power of words to change women’s social circumstances, as presented in the writings of Rich. It addresses how changes in language use might affect women’s circumstances and identities. Rich suggests the possibility that a change in the language use may have profound effects in a larger context of culture and that it will lead to a change in the social position of women. The concluding chapter evaluates Rich’s envisioned process of transformation and highlights the findings of the research analysing each chapter. It also proffers suggestions for further research in the related areas.