CHAPTER 5
Lesbian Continuum: A Celebration of Women’s Liberation

In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich tries to establish the fact that women are different from men. Here Rich attempts to define women’s feelings and give them some meaning in order to make the sense of difference valid. The change to defining ‘difference’ as lesbian identity is the major theory of her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Rich suggests in an interview with Marlene Packwood that lesbian identity is an essential part of radical feminism: “I think it has to be about transformation. And that’s where I see lesbianism and feminism having very common ground.”¹ Feminist writings on sexuality up to that point had concentrated mainly on the relation between reproduction and social controls. Rich builds on de Beauvoir’s thesis that women are originally homosexual, but she moves on from Beauvoir to concentrate on elements like desire and fantasy which is an important contribution of lesbian criticism to feminism. She was moving in an area riddled with contradictions. What enables her to talk about ‘difference’ with coherence is “a kind of clarity that we get from being that extra degree an outsider.”²

Rich wants to separate lesbianism from the gay movement in order to make it a part of general female experience. She does not reject heterosexual relationships, since she believes that patriarchy has imposed arbitrary sexual dichotomies (lesbian or heterosexual) which have no meaning. Rich wants to erase these false dichotomies. She changes our normal way of thinking by asking, “If women are the earliest sources of emotional caring and physical nurture ... why in fact women would ever
redirect [to men]". Rich concludes that the future for feminist criticism is to delineate, more strongly, all the forms that lesbian existence assumes. She does not want women to find the lesbian continuum necessarily in themselves but rather to help uncover and describe the cultural mystification of lesbian spheres.

This is of great importance for feminist analysis. When Rich talks about the construction of lesbianism she has actually a psychical and literary construction in her mind. If you take up ‘lesbian’ or ‘heterosexual’ position, it reproduces oppression, because ‘lesbianism’, as representation, depends on the ever-present heterosexual order of reality. But, Rich, by enormously enlarging the categories of lesbianism and therefore redrawing its system of representation, can place contradictions, overlaps, and distinctions which may change patriarchal ideology.

Rich joins critics like Michel Foucault in redrawing the sexual maps. Rich, like Foucault, is writing about images of male power and the way it operates. For both, sexuality is the key to understand the controls and regulations of capitalism. It is only with the help of sexuality that the workings of power can be understood as it provides the link between otherwise disparate discourses. Rich differs from Foucault at one point as she does not consider that the main characteristic of sexuality is the way it uses confessions to codify practices, for her, the main characteristic of sexuality is male violence. Lesbianism, she considers, is especially hated in patriarchy and projected by men as the feminine evil. Therefore, for Rich lesbians intensely need to create separate defined spaces of existence.

(i) Theoretical Basis of Lesbianism

In his *Introduction to History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault suggests that one of the artifices of power in the modern period is to make us assume
that power is monolithic, functioning only through uniform techniques of repression and silencing. Such a belief deludes us into assurance that if we openly talk about sex, it will bring about our freedom. Foucault attacks such naive confidence, suggesting that the economy of power is both more all encompassing and less homogeneous. Power can operate physically on bodies, but discursively it carves up the whole world through language different bodies are assigned to different categories and different actions are specified in relation to norms as praiseworthy, deviant, punishable, or criminal. Discursive power penetrates everywhere, giving a specific name to every possible variant of human action so as to control the world and leave nothing unexamined, unknown, uncataloged. Along with creating subjects, this power constructs sexual categories that structure the world in certain ways. The 19th century started, what Foucault calls, the “explosion of discourse” which in the field of sexuality created new vocabularies and categories for designating desires and actions that could then become subjected to medical, legal, and other institutional and state interventions. Foucault suggests that the increasing size of medical, biological and pedagogical discourses do not show any openness about sexuality. Rather, the proliferation of sexual categories limit sexuality to particular norms. Commenting on the medical categorization of homosexuality, he says:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy to a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodisim of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration the homosexual now was a species.¹

Power operates discursively to create homosexuality when it separates out and names as homosexual certain actions that had formerly been included in the grab-bag term sodomy. This new effort to be more precise, more
"scientific" in categorizing human sexual behaviour, itself demands that behavior be scrutinized with more care than ever before.

Another person who influenced the entire homosexual thinking is Oscar Wilde. He has come to personify many a trans-historical and trans-cultural model of homosexual identity, at once both enabling and limiting.

(ii) A Brief Sketch of the Lesbian Movement

As a movement, lesbianism started with the Stonewall Riots of 1969. When the police raided the Stonewall Tavern in New York City the riots started. Many gays, lesbians, transvestites fought back. The succeeding battles and riots got widespread publicity. The first meeting of the British Gay Liberation Front was held at the London School of Economics on Nov. 13, 1970, and the first Annual Gay Pride march on April 1, 1972. Since then, the gay liberation movement has been fighting social, legal, medical and religious oppression and trying to locate a whole new cultural space for the so far marginalised community. By the end of 1970s many women had "come out" as lesbians in the women's liberation movement and gradually started bringing together different threads of their existence: teaching lesbian literature, forming networks and support groups, and exploring postulations about a lesbian-centered literary criticism. They started widening the horizons of literary scholarship by pointing out to what had been for decades "unspeakable" – lesbian existence – thus calling, in novelist Jane Arnold's words, "what was never been". As women in a male-dominated academy, they explored the way they wrote and read from a different and "other" perspective. As lesbians in a heterosexist academy, says Bonnie Zimmerman, "we have continued to explore the impact of 'otherness', suggesting dimensions previously ignored, and yet necessary to understand fully the female condition and the creative work born from it."
Even before 1969 many lesbians had joined NOW (National Organization of Women, founded by Betty Friedan) chapters or women's liberation groups, but most of them had remained silent about their sexual preference. But now they broke the silence and started raising their own issues. From the very beginning there were serious conflicts in many groups between gay and "straight" women as heterosexual feminists emphasized that lesbian issues had nothing to do with feminism. Many feminists, most of them straight and White wanted to define "women's issues" in a limited way, both for practical purposes and because gay rights were so controversial that they feared if feminism got associated with them, the movement would suffer. The lesbians, on the other hand, believed that social attitudes would never change as long as they remained in the closet: that they had to identify themselves as lesbians and struggle for their civil rights. One lesbian wrote that, "...the worst part of being a homosexual is having to keep it secret.... the daily knowledge that what you are is so awful that it cannot be revealed."^7

In the women's movement, this conflict between lesbian and straight feminists surfaced for the first time in the New York chapter of NOW. It was a time when every "normal" person was expected to have a heterosexual life. and under these circumstances some lesbians unwillingly developed one. Others revolted: "It was bad enough to have to hide from colleagues in the office, but to hide from other women in the movement was too much."^8 wrote Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love in a 1972 book that chronicled NOW's lesbian-straight tribulations. Gradually. some lesbians began to come out. Rita Mae Brown was one of the first to take up the issue. For many NOW members, lesbianism was a sensitive area as they had to defend themselves against accusations that all feminists were lesbians. As the few out-of-the-closet lesbians were pressurising the
organization to take a stand on lesbian rights. The word got around that Betty Friedan herself regarded the lesbian issue a “lavender herring” and a lesbian, a “lavender menace.” Friedan was afraid that if the enemies of the movement succeeded in equating feminism with lesbianism, it would hamper her goals of achieving women’s rights. But as the time progressed, the conflict within NOW escalated and Rita Brown and others resigned from the organization. Dolores Alexander, an important member of the organization, was expelled from the organization on the suspicion of being a lesbian. Finally, the lesbians found the right opportunity to present their case. From May 1 to 3, 1970, a conference, called the Congress to Unite Women, was held in New York City. Four hundred feminists from all over the East Coast assembled for the Congress. A paper entitled “The Woman-Identified Woman” was presented.

It was one of those rare, turning points in the history of the movement. Afterwards, many things changed for ever, as the ideas presented in the paper were so fierce and powerful that they gripped the imagination of many feminists. Resolute to play a role in the movement, badly perturbed by being called sexually “deviant,” the lavender menace group decided to present lesbianism as a political, rather than a sexual, choice. Defining the lesbian, they said:

A lesbian is a rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society — perhaps then, but certainly later — cares to allow her. These needs and actions, over a period of years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, the accepted ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, until she is
in a state of continued war with everything around her and usually her self... To the extent that she cannot expect the heavy socialization that goes with being female, she can never truly find peace with herself. For she is caught somewhere between accepting society's view of her – in which case she cannot accept herself and coming to understand what this sexist society has done to her and why it is functional and necessary for it to do so.  

In the following months, the lavender menaces attracted a host of new members. They also changed their name to Radicalesbians. Meanwhile, many feminist groups faced new problems because with the stereotype stripped away, everybody was wondering which women were lesbians. It was a matter of fear for both who were still in the closet and straight women who wanted to talk about their own perplexity but could not distinguish those who might share it from those who would be offended to hear about it. A few out-of-the-closet lesbians were angry because straight women treated them as if they were men and flirted with them. During 1970, the lesbian-straight issue kept boiling beneath the surface in women’s groups. By the end of the year, this issue became public when Kate Millett was pilloried by Time magazine. The attack temporarily brought to a close much of the women’s movement, but the conflict continued for a few more years. At the center of it were the feminists who emphasized that lesbianism was not simply a sexual choice but was, in fact, primarily a political choice. They argued that if every one felt free to love anyone of either sex, male supremacy couldn't last. They exhorted true feminists to seek love and affection from other women, and they also presented lesbians as model feminists.
During 1971 lesbians founded new groups and identified themselves as lesbian separatists. The most popular of these groups, the Furies, was formed in Washington, D.C., by twelve women, including Rita Mae Brown and Charlotte Bunch, who finally became one of the major feminist theorists. The Furies set about evolving a lesbian feminist political analysis. As Bunch said, "... I belonged to a minority that was loathed.... I had to know why the simple act of loving other women sexually ... was so taboo and threatening to others."

There are a few fundamental questions asked by all the lesbians but they are still searching for their answers. In this context Bonnie Zimmerman puts forth a number of queries: Does a woman’s sexual and emotional preference affect the way she writes, reads and thinks? Is lesbianism present in the classroom and in scholarship? Is there a lesbian aesthetic different from a feminist aesthetic? What should a lesbian critic do? Can they establish a lesbian “canon” on the pattern of feminist critics’ female canon? Can lesbian feminists evolve insights into female creativity that might enrich all literary criticism? The answers to these questions vary from critic to critic but there is a set of assumptions which all accept - that a woman’s identity is not defined only by her relation to a male world and male literary tradition, that powerful ties between women are of great importance in women’s lives, and that a sexual and emotional orientation of a woman deeply influences her consciousness and therefore her creativity. Those critics, who have deliberately decided to read as lesbians, argue that this perspective can be uniquely liberating and can give “new insights into life and literature because it assigns the lesbian a specific vantage point from which to criticize and analyze the politics, language and culture of patriarchy.”
One way in which this “uniquely liberating” perspective takes shape is as a “critical consciousness about heterosexist assumptions.” Heterosexism is the group of values and structures that considers heterosexuality to be the only “natural” way of sexual and emotional expression. “the perceptual screen provided by our [patriarchal cultural conditioning.” Equally important, heterosexism assumes that every woman is either bound to a man or wishes she were. Women are considered as wives and mothers.

The Furies started examining heterosexism, and considered heterosexuality as a political institution rather than a personal choice. “because relationships between men and women are essentially political, they involve power and dominance.” They pointed out that all the institutions that oppressed women were based on the supposition that women would always put men first. Bunch argued that heterosexism was “a cornerstone of male supremacy.” She informed that women who established a relationship with men were rewarded with heterosexual privileges that included economic security and social status. That forced them to behave as the patriarchal society wanted them to behave and maintain a status quo. Bunch suggested that the straight women, who did not discern what heterosexual privilege was, should “try being a queer for a week.”

Heterosexual feminists rather tried to ignore the lesbians’ implied criticism of heterosexuality as an institution, and focused all their energies on defying any notion that lesbian sexual relationships were the only true patterns for liberated womanhood. This suggested that heterosexual feminists of the ’70s rarely examined the patriarchal assumptions upon which traditional definitions of heterosexuality were based, nor did they try to redefine the terms of their intimate relations in line with the radical
restructuring visualised in other areas of social life. By this lack of awareness they risked accepting that being a heterosexual was an essential part of their existence, and because of this reason they were reluctant to consider the possibility that sexual orientation was itself a social construct and would be meaningless if social and ideological punishments and privileges attached to illicit and licit forms of social expression were taken off.

(iii) Adrienne Rich’s Concept of Lesbian Continuum

The Radicalesbians’ concept of the “woman-identified woman” was proposed to be more than a depiction of sexual preference; they wanted to stop the competitiveness that divided women in patriarchy, thence to strengthen political and personal ties. They were of the view that the desire to define identity through sexual orientation would disappear in an androgynous utopia where the social meanings given to such “roles” had dissolved. Later on Adrienne Rich took these ideas further. In her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich widened the concept of the “woman-identified women” by presenting a new concept of a “lesbian continuum”. In this way Rich further displaced the focus on sexual love and emphasized the strength and love to be derived from female friendship and support networks. She suggested that because of the strong relationship between mothers and infants, a female’s first and fundamental attachment was to other women. She questioned: why, then, would women go to men? What social forces could “wrench women’s emotional and erotic energies” away from other women? Rich believed that the wrenching was done by “compulsory heterosexuality”. sexual choice forced by methods that ranged from rape to visions of romantic love. Her concept of “lesbian continuum” included all women-identified experiences, whether sexual or intense non-sexual experiences such as “bonding against male tyranny.”
Making her purpose clear for writing this essay, Rich writes in the foreword that it was written to defy the erasure of lesbian existence from feminist literature, which was not only anti-lesbian but anti-feminist in its consequences, and to distort the experience of heterosexual women at the same time. It was not written to widen separations but to encourage heterosexual feminists to scrutinize heterosexuality as a political institution which makes women powerless and so to change it to make women realize the depth and breadth of woman identification and woman relationship that has flowed like a persistent, though stifled, theme through, the heterosexual experience. She wanted to bridge the gap between lesbian and feminist, and thus to change their perspective of "unexamined heterosexuality."  

Rich challenges the assumptions that women have an "innate" sexual orientation towards men and that, as put forward by Doris Lessing in The Golden Notebook, (1962), the lesbian is simply acting out her bitterness toward man. She is also concerned with two other questions: how and why has women's preference of women as passionate friends, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community been suppressed, invalidated, pushed into hiding and disguise; and the virtual or complete neglect of lesbian existence in the whole gamut of literature, including feminist writings. She believes that any theory that considers lesbian existence as a peripheral or less "natural" phenomenon, as only "sexual preference," or as the reflection of either heterosexual or male homosexual ties is profoundly weakened thereby, whatever its other contributions and feminist theory also cannot afford to have distance with lesbianism.

Rich discusses four contemporary books by women writers. Nancy Chodorow's The Reproduction of Mothering, Dorothy Dinnerstain's, The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arguments and the Human Malaise, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's, For Her Own Good: 150 Years
of the Experts’ Advice to Women and Jean Baker Miller’s Toward a New Psychology of Women. All the authors believe that the social relations of the sexes are disorganised and deeply perplexing, if not crippling, for women; all of them want a change. Rich believes that they would have been more exact, powerful, and truly a force for change had they “dealt with lesbian existence as a reality and as a source of knowledge and power available to women, or with the institution of heterosexuality itself as a beachhead of male dominance.”^21 None of these books have raised the question whether, given a different context, women would choose heterosexual relation and marriage heterosexuality is taken as the “sexual preference” of “most women”, either directly or indirectly. Though these books are concerned with mothering, sex roles, relationships, and social prescriptions for women, but none of them interrogates compulsory heterosexuality as an institution strongly affecting all these, or questions the notion of “preference” or “innate orientation” even indirectly.

Though Nancy Chodorow sounds more logical in her argument that women, and only women, have to look after the child in the sexual division of labour it has led to an entire social organization of gender inequality. and that men as well as women must work as primary careers for children if that inequality is to change. She has tried to prove that men are “emotionally secondary” in women’s lives, that women have a “richer, ongoing inner world to fall back on… men do not become as emotionally important to women as women do to men.”^22 She concludes that because women have women as mothers, “the mother remains a primary internal object to the girl, so that heterosexual relationships are on the model of a nonexclusive, second relationship for her, whereas for the boy they re-create an exclusive, primary relationship.”^23
Rich argues that Chodorow ignores the pressures and restrictions that have historically forced women to have relation with men and punished them for coupling with women. Chodorow tries to nullify lesbian existence when she says that "lesbian relationships do tend to re-create mother-daughter emotions and connections, but most women are heterosexual". She joins further: "This heterosexual preference and taboo on homosexuality, in addition, to objective economic dependence on men, make the option of primary sexual bonds with other women unlikely — though more prevalent in recent years." Rich criticizes Chodorow for ignoring the hidden socializations and the overt forces which have pressurised women to accept marriage and heterosexual romance. Pressures ranging from the selling of daughters to the silences of literature to the images created by the media. But Chodorow seems to be trying to reform a man-made institution — compulsory heterosexuality — as if, in spite of deep emotional impulsions and complimentaries drifting women toward women, there is an occult/biological heterosexual inclination, a "preference" or "choice" which drifts women toward men. Rich suggests that heterosexuality, like motherhood, should be considered and studied as a "political institution" — even, or specially by those who think they are, in their personal experience, the harbingers of a new social relation between the sexes.

Rich asks a few fundamental questions. If women are the primary sources of emotional love and physical care for both female and male children: why does not the search for love and caring in both sexes naturally lead towards women: why actually women would always redirect that search: why species existence, "the means of impregnation and emotional/erotic relationships should ever have become so rigidly identified with each other: and why such violent strictures should be found necessary
to enforce women’s total emotional, erotic loyalty and subservience to men." Rich finds almost all her answers in the “compulsory heterosexuality” that tries to obliterate the entire existence of women.

Deriving basically from Kathleen Gough’s essay “The Origins of the Family”, Rich enunciates and elaborates upon eight characteristics of male power which include the power of men:

1. to deny women [their own] sexuality—[by means of clitoridectomy and infibulation; chastity belts: punishment, including death, for female adultery: punishment, including death, for lesbian sexuality; psychoanalytic denial of the clitoris; strictures against masturbation; denial of maternal and postmenopausal sensuality; unnecessary hysterectomy; pseudolesbian images in the media and literature: closing of archives and destruction of documents relating to lesbian existence]

2. or force it [male sexuality] upon them — [by means of rape (including marital rape) and wife beating; father-daughter, brother-sister incest; the socialization of women to feel that male sexual “drive” amounts to a right: idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, the media, advertising, etc: child marriage: arranged marriage: prostitution: the harem: psychoanalytic doctrines of frigidity and vaginal orgasm; pornographic depictions of women responding pleasurably to sexual violence and humiliation (a subliminal message being that sadistic heterosexuality is more “normal” than sexuality between women)]
3. to command or exploit their labour to control their produce – [by means of the institutions of marriage and motherhood as unpaid production; the horizontal segregation of women in paid employment; the decoy of the upwardly mobile token women; male control of abortion, contraception, sterilization, and childbirth; pimping; female infanticide, which robs mothers of daughters and contributes to generalized devaluation of women]

4. to control or rob them of their children [by means of father right and “legal kidnapping”: enforced sterilization; systematized infanticide; seizure of children from lesbian mothers by the courts: the malpractice of male obstetrics: use of the mother as “token torturer” in genital mutilation or in binding the daughter’s feet (or mind) to fit her for marriage]

5. to confine them physically and prevent their movement:- [by means of rape as terrorism keeping women off the streets: purdah: foot binding: atrophying of women’s athletic capabilities: high heels and “feminine” dress codes in fashion: the veil: sexual harassment on the streets: horizontal segregation of women in employment: prescriptions for “full-time” mothering at home: enforced economic dependence of wives]

6. to use them as objects in male transactions—[use of women as “gifts”: bride price: pimping; arranged marriage: use of women as entertainers to facilitate male
deals – e.g., wife-hostess, cocktail waitress required to
dress for male sexual titillation, call girls, “bunnies”,
geisha, *kisaeng* prostitutes, secretaries]

7. *to cramp their creativeness*-[witch persecutions as
campaigns against midwives and female healers, and as
program against independent, “unassimilated” women:
definition of male pursuits as more valuable than female
within any culture, so that cultural values become the
embodiment of male subjectivity; restriction of female
self-fulfillment to marriage and motherhood; sexual
exploitation of women by male artists and teachers; the
social and economic disruption of women’s creative
aspirations; erasure of female tradition]

8. *to withhold from them large areas of society’s knowledge
and cultural attainments*-[by means of non-education of
females; the “Great Silence” regarding women and
particularly lesbian existence in history and culture; sex-
role tracking which deflects women from science,
technology, and other “masculine” pursuits; male social
professional bonding which excludes women;
discrimination against women in the professions] 28

These are some of the modes through which male power manifests
and upholds itself. It becomes quite clear from Rich’s analysis that what
women are facing is not a simple force but a pervasive cluster of forces,
ranging from physical violence to domination of consciousness, which
implies that a tremendous potential counterforce is having to be checked.
While some of the ways by which male power is exercised, are easily
recognizable, some ways are hidden under ideological cover which are to be uncovered. The way pornography functions and shapes consciousness is a serious matter, as it projects women as objects of sexual appetite having no emotional context, individual meaning or personality but only a sexual commodity to be consumed by males. The most detrimental message conveyed by pornography is that women are natural sexual prey to men, that sexuality and violence are interconnected, that for women love is essentially masochistic, physical torture is erotic. Rich believes that pornography does not simply produce a favourable condition in which sex and violence are interchangeable, but it also "widens the range of behaviour considered acceptable from men in heterosexual intercourse". Behaviour which repeatedly robs women of their autonomy, honour, and sexual power, including the power of loving and being loved by women in mutuality and uprightness.

The fact that we consider rape as violence and intercourse as sexuality, removes rape from the sexual range completely. And this placing of rape in the field of "violence" away from the field of sex, permits one to oppose it without raising any questions about the range to which the institution of heterosexuality has demarcated force as a normal part of sexual intercourse. It is never asked whether, under conditions of male domination, the idea of "consent" has any meaning.

Taking into account the daily eroticization of women's subjugation, Rich questions the psychoanalytic perspective that the male need to control women's sexuality is the result of some primordial male "fear of women" and of women's sexual inconsistency. Rich argues that it is more likely that men do not fear that they will have women's sexual appetites forced on them or that women desire to suppress and devour them but that women could be completely listless toward them, that men could be permitted
sexual and emotional – therefore economic – approach to women only on women’s conditions, otherwise being left on the margin of the matrix. Rich incorporates insights from Kathleen Barry’s research which connects all enforced conditions under which women live subject to men: prostitution, marital rape, father-daughter and brother-sister incest, wife battering, pornography, bride price, the selling of daughters, purdah, and genital mutilation. She perceives the rape paradigm – where the victim of sexual violence is considered responsible for her own victimization – as leading to the rationalization and acceptance of other types of subjugation where the woman is supposed to have “chosen” her destiny, to accept it passively, or to have invited it perversely through indiscreet behaviour. But contrary to it, Barry upholds that female sexual subjectivity is present in “ALL” situations where they cannot change the conditions of their existence. Instead of “blaming the victim”. Barry focuses on the “pathology of sex colonization” itself, the ideology of “cultural sadism” projected by the pornography industry and by the overall identification of women basically as “sexual beings whose responsibility is the sexual service of men”. Barry depicts what she calls a “sexual domination perspective” through which sexual exploitation of and violence against women by men has been presented as invisible by treating it as natural and inevitable. From this perspective, women can be strained to any limit to meet the sexual and emotional needs of men. Barry suggests that the only way of coming out of this slavery is to know it perfectly in all its manifestations. It is only through “knowing” and facing it directly that women “can learn to chart our course out of this oppression, by envisioning and creating a world which will preclude sexual slavery”. She warns women: “Until we name the practice, give conceptual definition and form to it, illustrate its life over time and in space, those who are its most obvious victims will also not be able to name it or define their
experience.” Thus Barry agrees to the fact that the difficulty of naming and conceptualizing the sexual slavery of women is because of compulsory heterosexuality which compels a woman to see man’s sexual drive as “natural” and inevitable and consider herself and her sexual life only in terms of male sexuality. It further leads to male identification – the casting of one’s social, political, and intellectual loyalties with men: put them above women in reliability, honour, status, and importance in most places, ignoring any comparative quality that women can have, including oneself.

Adrienne Rich argues that women are driven to this sexual slavery through continuous socialization, the media, the family, and the institution of motherhood. She writes: The assumption that:

most women are innately heterosexual’ stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for feminism. It remains a tenable assumption partly because lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease, partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic, partly because to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a “preference” at all, but has to be imposed, managed, organised, propagandized, and maintained by force, is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and “innately” heterosexual. Rich believes that women will require enormous energy and courage to question heterosexuality as “preference” or “choice” or “natural”. but if they do this and break this silence it will open new vistas of freedom and power leading them to new paths and a new vision in personal relationships.
Rich makes a distinction between *lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum*. Lesbian existence consists in both the breaking of a taboo and the renouncing of a compulsory way of life. It is a direct or indirect assault on male right to approach to women. It is an "act of resistance" to patriarchy. In this kind of a relationship women are living together, not necessarily in a sexual relationship but rather in an atmosphere of loving and sharing both emotional and political support. But lesbian continuum refers to:

a range – through each woman’s life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience: not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between women and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support...we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of ‘lesbianism’.  

This continuum comprises the giving and taking of political support, exchanging difficulties and ideas, and evolving a culture of sisterhood which recognises and strengthens women’s resistance to patriarchy and power. Lesbianism becomes conceptualized here as a sexuality which is not about unequal power relations, about violence or domination, but as a safe space for women. It is also an effort to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is not confined to any single part of the body or only to the
body itself: as an energy which is not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has
defined it, omnipresent in "the sharing of joy whether physical, emotional,
psychic," and in the sharing of task; as the empowering bliss which "makes
us less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of
being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-
effacement, depression, self-denial." In this way Rich reverses the
relations between gender and sexuality presented in both naturalizing and
some psychoanalytic theories. Instead of heterosexuality being essentially
intertwined with femininity, lesbianism becomes the hallmark of
authenticated female existence: the sign of the woman-identified woman.
However, in Rich's discussion lesbianism appears to be less about sexuality
and more about resistance for women against patriarchy. Echoing Rich's
concept Sheila Jeffreys also considers the demolition of heterosexual desire
as an essential step on the way to women's liberation. Cora Kaplan,
however, argues that such a stand amounts to "naturalistic essentialism",
asserting that for Rich "female heterosexuality is socially constructed and
female homosexuality is natural.... Political lesbianism is more than a
strategic position for feminism. it is a return to nature."^36

In Rich's concept anything that provides an experience specific to
women only, like the infant suckling at the mother's breast which attaches
the woman back to the body and sensations of her mother, is a lesbian
experience. In this way every woman moves in and out of this continuum,
whether she identifies herself as lesbian or not. Thus the threads that
connect women to one another are spread throughout history. If the degree
and ways, through which heterosexuality was imposed, are studied
carefully, a whole range of women-identified relationships appear clearly,
whether the Beguines of the twelfth century, the more celebrated Lesbians
of the women's school around Sappho of the 7th century B.C., the secret
economic networks reported among African women, the Chinese marriage-resistance sisterhoods or Emily Dickinson. One fact very clearly comes out that “women have always resisted male tyranny”. Rich says that a feminism of action, though often supported by a theory, has regularly “re-emerged” in every culture and in every period. Rich rejects outright Dinnerstein’s viewpoint that women have simply cooperated with men in the “sexual arrangements” of history.

Rich argues that heterosexuality is imposed on women both forcibly and ideologically. There is an actual identifiable system of heterosexual propaganda, of interpreting women as existing for the sexual use of men, which extends beyond “sex role” or “gender” stereotyping or “sexist imagery” to comprise a great number of verbal and non-verbal messages. Rich calls this “control of consciousness.” The possibility of a woman who refuses to be a sexual commodity – the lesbian possibility – is “buried, erased, occluded, distorted, misnamed, and driven underground.” Rejecting Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s study that women who married, remained married, yet lived in a deeply female emotional world, “preferred” or “chose” heterosexuality, Rich suggests that women have married because it was essential to survive economically, to have children who would not face economic deprivation, to be respectable, to do what was supposed of women, and because heterosexual romance has been depicted as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment. They might sincerely or ambivalently have complied with the institution, but their feelings and sensuality have not been subdued or restricted within it. Rich calls this “double life”: an “apparent acquiescence to an institution founded on male interest and prerogative.” This life has been characteristic of female experience. Toni Morrison, in her novel Sula, beautifully depicts this double life which women live:
Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her....Nel was one of the reasons *Sula* had drifted back to Medallion.... The men had merged into one large personality: the same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love. Whenever she introduced her private thoughts into their rubbings and goings, they hooded their eyes. They taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money. She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her awhile to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be for a woman.41

Rich believes that lesbians have historically been denied of a political existence through "inclusion" as female versions of male homosexuality. And by projecting lesbian existence equal to male homosexuality, as both are denounced, there is an effort to "erase" female reality once more. Rich visualizes lesbian experience as a completely *female* experience like motherhood, with specific oppressions, meanings and powers which cannot be realized if women simply place it with other sexually denounced existences. Just as the term *parenting* hides the specific and important reality of being a parent who is actually a mother, the term gay has the potential of blurring the very outlines women are supposed to be aware of, which are of decisive significance for feminism and for the freedom of women as a group.

Rich perceives women identification as a fountain-head of energy and female power which is "curtailed and contained" under the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. The rejection of this reality and conspicuity of women's passion for women, women's preference of women as friends, life partners, and community, and the effort to obliterate such bonds and
disintegrate under intense force. is an effort to perpetuate their slavery which means an unpredictable loss of the power of all women to change the social structure of the sexes. to free themselves and each other. Rich says that the “lie” of compulsory heterosexuality not only affects the feminist scholarship but colours every aspect of a woman’s life. This lie is many-layered. In Western culture, one layer is the romantic one which expresses that women are essentially attracted to men even when that pull is suicidal, it is still an “organic imperative”. In the practice of social sciences it expresses that the primary love between the sexes is “normal” that women need men who can provide social and economic security, that those women who do not submit their primary intensity to men must be, in functional terms, denounced to an even more dissolute outsider-hood than their outsider-hood as women. There is another layer of the lie that women are attached to women out of hatred for men. Lesbian existence is also projected as mere shelter from male tyranny, rather than as “an electric and empowering charge” between women.42

(v) Lesbian Continuum in her Poetry

Adrienne Rich’s poetry presents a wide spectrum of lesbian experience and takes her concept of lesbian continuum to new heights. In “The Blue Ghazals” she writes that “The moment when a feeling enters the body / is political. This touch is political.”43 This realization comes from the fact that sex is not enough to link men and women:

    Plugged-in to her body
    he came the whole way
    but it makes no difference
    If not this then what
    would fuse a connection44
She struggles to understand the “tragedy of sex” and reaches to the conclusion that “this world gives no room/ to be what we dreamt of being.” She decides to dissociate herself from the heterosexual culture and fight against it: “I identified myself as a radical feminist and soon after – not as a political act but out of powerful and unmistakable feelings – as a lesbian.” In “Diving into the Wreck,” Rich talks about the confusions of history and sexuality, the damages, the riches rotting and waiting to be opened. The speaker perceives herself as poet of a necessary, unmediated truth – the truth of the wreck – that has been deformed by the patriarchal book of myths. “The drowned face always staring/toward the sun” implies that this wreck is the death of patriarchal culture, dead because its eyes can turn only toward the sun. Later, the speaker, subsuming all gender positions in her voice, proclaims. “I am he/whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes.” The “open eyes” allude to “those are pearls that were his eyes,” the great sea-change undergone by the dead father. The truth of the wreck deformed by masculine myth is that sea-change is a good thing. The “ribs of the disaster” are “curbing their assertion”: out of “disaster” the (self-) destruction of patriarchal culture, comes the “assertion” of the female “treasures that prevail” in the “deep element”. The speaker continues with her role of the wreck’s sea-changed paternal owner to tell the truth about the patriarchal existence. its rotten cargo of semi-precious exploited goods, taken for profit out of colonized mother-earth by men. its useless. “fouled” instruments of navigation which effectively “once held to a course”. These are not the treasures which prevail. Finally the poem reaches the conclusion that the very act of facing the wreck, the task of rewriting the story of the wreck, the story of sea change, as a book of feminine truth rather than a book of false patriarchal myth, is the real treasure that prevails:
We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.\textsuperscript{52}

"Back to this scene" implies the womb-return metaphor that underlies the whole poem. The last four lines clearly manifest the poem's feminist position: the book of myths’ deformation of the truth of the wreck is a result of its erasure of “our” names from the cultural history. The maternal feminine element in which we take our plunge in this poem is destructive only to dying patriarchy. For women it is a source of new cultural truth-telling, a fountain-head for a whole new poetry “beginning here”.

In the early 1970s. Rich took the risk of uncovering the suppressed sexual and psychological materials that she had once covered and from which she had subsequently reverberated. She proclaims that freedom in her poem “Re-forming the Crystal”. Addressed to man, this poem gives him his due, and discharge. The speaker tries to imagine how male sexuality “feels” and what does it “desire”. This woman has got new energy and she “calculates” what has gone with her:

In my head I am already threading the beltways
that rim this city,
all the old roads that used to wander the country
having been lost.
Tonight I understand
my photo on the license is not me
my
name on the marriage contract was not mine.\textsuperscript{53}

She realizes how her mother was "silenced" by her father even before her birth. Shattering down the old identities, she desires to make a new identity based on the relationship with other women. This desire is not "trivial": "I can compare it with the greatest of those accidents. But the energy it draws on might lead to racing a cold engine, crackling the cold spiderweb, parachuting into the field of a poem wired with danger, or to a trip through gorges and canyons, into the cratered night of female memory, where delicately and with intense care the chieftainess inscribes upon the ribs of the volcano the name of the one she has chosen".\textsuperscript{54}

Importantly this poem shifts straight columns of poetry with paragraphs of prose. Catharine Stimpson calls Rich a "sophisticated" learner of the genetics of the text who tenaciously crosses autobiography with biography: polemic with scholarship; political theory with literary criticism".\textsuperscript{55} Partly, her experimentations with genetic connections are the "deconstructive" signs of post-modernism. In greater part, her blending of "subjective" and objective genres, advocacy and argument, exhibits her vision of their inseparable existence. Her style also symbolises the position of contemporary, educated women who cannot be forced to select between public and private lives, they can live both – at the same time. They cannot be forced to select between writing about public or private concerns, they can pick up both – at the same time.

In an interview with Diana Middlebrook in \textit{Poets in Person}. Rich says, "It was enormously important to me that lesbian poets... were clearly writing and visibly writing as lesbians and so I feel as though I was very
much empowered to go on and write out of those parts of myself by the fact that other women were clearly doing that. Her poetic temperament also exhibits aturn towards an exploration of relation between women. Poems like “Waking in the Dark”, “Incipience”, “Dialogue”, “The Phenomenology of Anger”, “Translations” and “Meditations for a Savage Child” vividly presents her dissatisfaction with existing heterosexual relationships and her increasing faith in the lesbian relationships which include sex in its “broadest” sense, not merely sexual desire. Thus, “After Twenty Years” shows women together in one space. Their relationship is ambiguous. As they are “in the prime of life” they could be sisters, friends, lovers or different other selves as the poem later on suggests. “It is strange to be so many women” but it proclaims that she/they will “flow into history now as the women of their time”.

The important aspect of these poems is that even where they can be read as a woman’s exploration of self, this exploration is perceived as a relational one, a conversation between one female self and another. There is a constant process of trying to understand that other female self: thus in “Translations” the persona imagines a woman whose man is in another relationship as having a ‘sister’ turn ‘enemy’ through this act which the new female lower cannot discuss as a grief “shared, unnecessary / and political.” An urge for all inclusive sisterhood that transcends differences among women is very intensively felt in Rich’s poetry. Hers is an ideal world where everyone is free to live one’s life the way one wants it to. Drawing on Plato’s cave myth. Rich says of lesbian existence in her poem “Origins and History of Consciousness”.

I want to call this life.

But I can’t call it life until we start to move
Beyond this secret circle of fire
Where our bodies are giant shadows flung on a wall
Where the night becomes our inner darkness…

Rich wants to reject the practice of defining women in relation to men. Like Monique Wittig, Rich presents lesbian love as a paradigm of female sexuality which cannot either be defined by men or exploited by a phallocentric political system.

Rich's most sustained declaration of lesbianism is her sequence "Twenty-One Love Poems". Olga Broumas says that. "The gesture of these poems is one of desire for a totality of living, openness, communication and trust, in the new, the immediate, the real". Rich is concerned here with two civilizations. The first is "this still unexcavated hole/ called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world" in which women are forced to live. Rich's disloyalty to this "civilization" is immediately clear, for the culture of the sons of educated men displays at its peak its most meaningful artifacts: the imagery of violence, human distortion, gynephobia, horror. Rich wants to put beside this civilization, as opposition and reproach, another conception of civilization – one that is women-centered, women-identified, women-created. As women do not have any model before them except the present repressive patriarchal system, so they will require a lot of energy and imagination to create this new world for them. She writes "No one has imagined us". She wants to convey that no man, no work of literature, no part of patriarchal culture has ever thought of the possibility of two women together, loving each other and this as the starting of a new woman-centered civilization. For this difficult task women need to grasp their "lives inseparable/ from those rancid dreams, that blurt of metal, those disgraces." Expressing "the desire to show you, to everyone I love/ to
move openly together." this poem offers a femmage to a lesbian love—relationship. Against the violent past, "freighted with different languages, different meanings" the persona asserts. "The woman who cherished her suffering is dead. I am her descendant. / I love the scar tissue she handed on to me. / but I want to go on from here with you." This forms a refusal to be cast in the role of victim; it is an act of defiance further revealed in the statement that "Only she who says she did not choose, is the loser in the end." Affirmation, in this sequence of poems, comes in the form of voluntarism, the emphasis upon the possibility of control: "No one’s fated or doomed to love anyone./ The accidents happen, we are not heroines. / they happen in our lives like car crashes." culminating in the concluding poem in which versions of the word "choose" figure thrice. The resolution that " I mean to go on living" is emphasized in the full realization that "two women together is a work /nothing in civilization has made simple" because "we’re out in a country that has no language/no laws" and "whatever we do together is pure invention."

"Twenty-One Love Poems" explores emotional complexity and ambivalence in addition to the pleasures and joys of a relationship, and these poems admit the loneliness and separation that result from failed love:

and I discern a woman

I loved, drowning in secrets, fear wound round her throat

and choking her like hair. And this is she

with whom I tried to speak, whose hurt, expressive head

turning aside from pain, is dragged down deeper

where it cannot hear me,

and soon I shall know I was talking to my own soul. 

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Although the poet’s lover fails to accept the relationship publicly, these poems affirm shared love while accepting pain, anger, and fear:

this we were, this is how we tried to love.
and these are the forces they had ranged against us.
and these are the forces we have ranged within us.
within us and against us. against us and within us.  

These poems, poignantly present Rich’s concept that institutionalized heterosexuality robs women of their freedom, dignity, and sexual potential, which also includes the potential of loving and being loved by women in mutuality and integrity. She puts emphasis on the fact that the nature of female sexuality is defined as shame and guilt in order to control women’s behaviour.

(vi) Theoretical Importance of Rich’s Thoughts

If women want to change themselves and their social relations, if they want to liberate themselves and each other, they must revive that lesbianism hidden or denied, feared or despised. Lesbianism, says Catherine Stimpson, is an “imperative”. not because Rich claims so, but because it is a “wellspring” of identity that should be sprung if women want to demand any authentic identity at all. Rich says. “It is the lesbian in us who is creative, for the dutiful daughter of the fathers in us is only a hack.”

Through her theories Rich tries to reverse the accusatory slander that lesbianism is “unnatural”. For her, what is “unnatural” is not the lesbian presence but the absence, of women’s bodies, to be “homesick....for a woman....” In the 1970s, her theories were influenced by, and influences on, the cultural feminism that was a vital factor in feminist thinking, particularly about sexuality, culture, and identity.
eroticizing the 19th century ideologies of gender, with their endorsement of female and male divisions. Cultural feminism seems to categorise the world into female and male: to idealise female sexuality and being, and to demonize male sexuality and doing. Ironically, it has the effect of perpetuating a conservative ideology that prefers divinely authorised gender roles and “female” and “male” behaviours. It seems to consider gender and sex as altogether separate categories. Judith Butler says that if we accept that gender is constructed and that it is not in any way “naturally” linked to sex, then the distinction between gender and sex seems to be increasingly unstable. In that case, gender is greatly independent of sex, “a free-floating artifice” as she puts it. Asking the question as to whether “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender, Butler thinks that sex was always already gender, so that the sex/gender distinction is actually not a distinction at all. She rejects the view that either gender or sex is an “abiding substance” by arguing that a heterosexual, heterosexist culture establishes the coherence of those categories in order to perpetuate and maintain what Adrienne Rich calls “compulsory heterosexuality” – the dominant order in which men and women are required or even forced to be heterosexual. Butler emphasises that gender identities that do not conform to the system of “compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality” reveal how gender norms are socially instituted and maintained.

Regarding Rich’s article “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” as a “necessary first step” to further thinking, Ann Ferguson finds “serious flaws” in it from a socialist feminist perspective. Building on de Beauvoir’s premise that women are originally homosexual and lesbianism is a deliberate refusal to resign to the compelling force of heterosexual ideology, a refusal that works as an underground feminist resistance to patriarchy. Rich argued that “lesbian continuum” could include
all women identified experience whether or not women desire sexual experience with women. Thus, constructing a lesbian – feminist approach to lesbian history Rich writes that “the search for lesbian history needs to be understood politically, not simply as the search for exceptional women who were lesbians, but as the search for power, for nascent undefined feminism, for the ways that women-loving women have been nay-sayers to male possession and control of women.”

Ferguson argues that to use such an approach to find out “nascent undefined feminism” in any historical era, the feminist historian should know what she is searching for. She should have a clear understanding of the implications arising from the concept lesbian so as to be able to identify such women. While Rich visualizes lesbian identity as a transhistorical and crosscultural phenomenon, on the contrary, Ferguson considers it a historical phenomenon, which cannot be applied to all societies and all periods of history. Ferguson thinks that Rich’s view that the extent to which a woman is sexually and emotionally free from men while connecting with women measures resistance to patriarchy “oversimplifies and romanticizes” the idea of such resistance without actually defining the conditions that make for successful resistance rather than mere victimization. Though she agrees with Rich’s view that some of the clinical definitions of lesbian try to separate the erotic from female friendship and thus limit the erotic itself.

Ferguson finds another problem in Rich’s definition of lesbian continuum. According to her, Rich does not clearly differentiate between three different aims of definitional strategy: first, valorizing the concept lesbian; second, providing a socio-political definition of the contemporary lesbian community; and thirdly, reconceptualizing history from a lesbian
and feminist perspective. These aims are conceptually different and may not be attainable by one concept – the lesbian continuum.

Rich gives two primary suppositions in her defence of the lesbian continuum as a construct to understand female resistance to patriarchy. First, she supposes that the institution of compulsory heterosexuality is the key mechanism underlying and perpetuating male dominance. Second, she thinks that all heterosexual relations are compulsory relations. As Rich does not provide any arguments to sustain these crucial suppositions. Ferguson takes it as a serious flaw. She does not consider the suppression of lesbian relations the sufficient factor to male domination, rather there are some other factors that contribute to the overall structure of male domination through the institution of heterosexuality like the control of female biological reproduction, male control of state and political power and economic systems that include discrimination based on class and race.

Ferguson argues that by targeting heterosexuality as the key mechanism of male domination Rich romanticizes lesbianism and overlooks the actual condition of individual lesbian or heterosexual women’s lives. Calling women who put resistance to patriarchy the lesbian continuum supposes, not only that all lesbians have resisted patriarchy, but that all real patriarchal resisters are lesbians or approach lesbianism. It also negates the “old lesbian” subculture that includes many non-political, co-opted, and economically strong lesbians. It negates the existence of some heterosexual women who are feminists and maintain an equal relationship with men. Such women would reject that their relationships are coercive, or even that they are compelled to make their needs, self-respect, or relationship with women secondary. But Rich herself make it very clear in her afterword to the essay:
I never have maintained that heterosexual feminists are walking about in a state of “brainwashed” false consciousness.... In this paper I was trying to ask heterosexual feminists to examine their experience of heterosexuality critically and antagonistically, to critique the institution of which they are a part, to struggle with the norm and its implications for women’s freedom....

Ferguson considers the concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” itself problematic. Rich seems to suggest that women who are naturally lesbians are forced by the social systems of patriarchal family to “turn to the father”, hence to men. Ferguson argues that if a girl’s natural love for her mother is itself because of the social fact that women, not men, mother, then neither lesbianism nor heterosexuality can be said to be women’s natural or unforced sexual preference. If humans are originally bisexual or transsexual at birth, it will not work to propose that lesbianism is the more authentic sexual preference for feminists, and that heterosexual feminists who do not shift their sexual preference are simply deceiving themselves about their true sexuality.

Ferguson says that a socialist–feminist analysis of male supremacy perceives the systems that oppress women as more complicated and difficult to dislodge than does the utopian and idealist simplicity of lesbian separatism. They are multiple systems of dominance which some times approve as well as disapprove one another: capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, racism, imperialism. Women require, she says, autonomous groups of resisters which can oppose each of these forms of domination; but they also require connections among themselves. If feminism as a movement is really revolutionary, it cannot give precedence to one form of male domination (heterosexuality) to the exclusion of others. “One’s sexual
preference may indeed be a political act, but it is not necessarily the best, nor the paradigmatic, feminist political act. Naming the continuum of resistance to patriarchy the lesbian continuum has the political implication that it is.**

Ferguson agrees with Rich that some trans-historical concepts are required to emphasize the continuity of women's resistance to patriarchy. But she believes that these concepts should not overlook either the political complicity of the present challenges as feminists or the historically specific political consciousness as lesbians. "Rich's argument, on the one hand that compulsory heterosexuality is the key mechanism of patriarchy, and on the other hand that the lesbian continuum is the key resistance to it, has both of these unfortunate consequences.**

Emphasizing the need of categories that exactly name and categorize the actions and lives of women, both dead and alive, who, within their given conditions, resisted the historically specific forms of domination that owned their womanly existence. Jacquelyn N. Zita rejects Ferguson's criticism of Rich's concept as being ahistorical, static, or falsely universalizing. She emphasizes the need to understand Rich's concept in terms of the political interpretation that she brings to her lesbianism, and that the point of debate is not whether the historically specific definition of lesbian (given by Ferguson) accurately names the lesbian existence of women, but what is being named and why. She also questions Ferguson's three point criteria for evaluating definitional strategies. She argues that much of what is needed of the definition is concerned with the use, in this case the community use, that will be made of the term.

Ferguson's defines a lesbian as one who "is a woman who has sexual and erotic-emotional ties primarily with women or who sees herself as
centrally involved with a community of self-identified lesbians whose sexual and erotic-emotional ties are primarily with women; and who is herself a self-identified lesbian. This refers to a rather cautiously chosen (often privileged) group of lesbian-identified women, living in the subcultures of advanced capitalist-societies. This type of culturally defined lesbianism gives a sense of continuity and belongingness by means of a community membership. The constancy and continuity of one’s actual lesbian identity depend upon community regard and respect, an identity which permeates heedless of the episodic character of a woman’s actual lesbian practices. According to Ferguson, “homosexual practices by themselves are not sufficient to constitute a homosexual identity.”

On the other hand Rich’s definition of lesbian concerns itself with the continuity of resistance that women have always shown in independent, non heterosexual and women-centered ways. Continuity is achieved by naming that struggle a lesbian struggle. The sense of continuity and shared identity is not achieved by symbolic transactions between self and other within a special linguistic community. Zita says that it is an ethnographic ascription which depends on the criteria of woman-centered resistance used to separate groups of lesbian existence from the dominant culture. She argues that Ferguson’s definition of lesbian has already snapped the roots of this continuity as her definition refers to a very modern form of lesbian existence. Rich’s concept of lesbian continuum seems to be much more promising because it is based on a commonality that unifies the different facets of lesbian living into a shared unity. This commonality comes out directly from the existence of compulsory heterosexuality as an institution, based on coercive regulations that have been essential to enforce and maintain women’s erotic loyalty and subservience to men. As Rich says, “We can say that there is a nascent feminist political content in the act of'
choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutional heterosexuality." The realization of this love for one another and the courage to act on those feelings, however:

fleeting and minimal, is an awakening of the lesbian continuum in our lives. It is as if the lesbian continuum exists in the transcendental sense as a series of 'hints': a multitude of pulls, tugs, palpitations, and desires surfacing in the intimate episodes between women, in their discovery of mutual powers and attractions, and in the many moments quickly eclipsed by the return of repression.

These moments and impulses can be linked together to form a continuous lesbian identity, one that not only names these desires but holds to them, an identity that will acquire its expression within the historical context in which a woman lives out her existence.

Though Ferguson is partly correct in saying that Adrienne Rich fails to sort "successful resistance" from "mere victimization" by joining together "many forms: of primary intensity between and among women." but this does not nullify the importance of Rich's concept. In Rich's vision, women who resist the bride price are part of the same continuum as the modern lesbian-identified dyke. "the revolting hag" and this resistance is continuously against different historically specific forms of male-dominated mastery over the female body and its cultural expression. As the historical conditions change, the possibility of resistance and its success or failure also change accordingly. The value of Rich's concept lies in the fact of it being a "strategic term" which, Zita defines. "not only elucidates the ways in which women have always resisted male tyranny and compulsory heterosexuality, but also ways in which these episodic resistances can be
solidified and crystallized into an autonomous culture of resistance. If this cultural practice is to become revolutionary in true sense, then a sense of continuity with the past and a determined feeling of a continuum against which the degree of a women’s resistance can be measured appear to be “desirable and necessary.” The concept of a “lesbian continuum as a strategic term becomes a tool for articulating and making intelligible our lesbian-feminist living.”

Zita gives four reasons for adopting the lesbian continuum. Firstly, by using this term women can stop the hysteria about “the lesbian miracle”, that something eventually occurs to women out of nowhere and sometimes overnight. Secondly, by broadening the meaning of woman-centered resistance, the concept of lesbian continuum makes the quality of resistance the focal point in the life of a woman. As Rich point out, “we begin to observe behaviour, both in history and individual biography, that has hitherto been invisible or misnamed: behaviour which often constitutes, given the limits of the counterforce exerted in a given time or place, radical rebellion. And we can connect these rebellions and the necessity for them with the physical passion of woman for woman which is central to lesbian existence: the erotic sensuality that has been, precisely, the most violently erased fact of female experience.”

Zita argues that by naming these past resistances as lesbian, women can define the lesbian option as a mode of resistance to patriarchy qualitatively different from other modes because it contains the sexual component. That is, the lesbian option, as an erotic, emotional, social, and political pledge to other women offers an option that cannot, like the options of androgyny or dual parenting, be included within the institution of heterosexuality. Likewise, it cannot be rejected as a simple negation or reaction to dehumanised heterosexuality- “it is radically other and expensive.” She says that the concept of lesbian continuum provides
an opportunity to ask "a whole new array of questions" related to the institution of heterosexuality. Questions that need further theoretical and political explorations. If the institution of heterosexuality is a key institution of patriarchy, the lesbian continuum offers a background against which different strategies of resistance can be evaluated.

Thirdly, it is "anti-clinical in orientation". It cleanses the concept of its clinical fixation, by defining it as a political term. This continuum is not totally "reactive", rather it contains lesbian existence as a source of power and knowledge available to women, as a reality that would continue to exist outside of its present historically required form of resistance to patriarchy. Finally, the concept of lesbian continuum liberates the imagination from the either/or clinical categories of patriarchal sexual indoctrination. With the help of a continuum women can start to appreciate aspects of heterosexual women’s lives. The various ways in which women have always cared for other women without caring for men, seen each other without seeing men, and associated with each other without associating with men can be further developed by a shared and guilt-free lesbian sensibility. Zita compares the lesbian-identified consciousness with the Marxist concept of class consciousness, an awareness that exists in occult forms until gets the right conditions for the emergence of a revolutionary subject. In both of them radical resistance is always present, it only requires the right opportunity to come out. In the same way, the concept of lesbian continuum empowers women to question the polarity that divides straight and lesbian women. It does so by questioning these differences, while acknowledging the similarities, a questioning which does not allow dishonesty or dread about women’s mutually found differences. Zita writes, "the idea of lesbian continuum opens to new interrogation the institution of heterosexuality as one of the core institutions in the oppression and
exploitation of women’s lives. Only against the background of a lesbian continuum does the institution of heterosexuality stand out in sharp relief. A socialist feminist analysis that does not take compulsory heterosexuality seriously as the central factor in female oppression loses this insight.”98
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