CHAPTER 3
Language, Power and Politics of Sexuality

One of the questions that has pursued Adrienne Rich throughout her poetic career is whether, and how, innovative or so-called avant-garde poetic language is necessarily or even “potentially revolutionary”: Do they simply use a “language so deracinated that it is privy in its rebellions only to a few?”

This question automatically leads to its opposite: “Must a radical social imagination clothe itself in a language worn thin by usage or debased by marketing, promotion, and the will to power?” She has constantly been forced by these “unsilenced questions”. She believes in the necessity for a poetic language “untethered” from the compromised language of state and media. She says, “we need poetry as living language, the core of every language, something that is still spoken, about or in the mind, muttered in secret, subversive, reaching around corners, crumpled into a pocket, performed to a community, read aloud to the dying, recited by heart; scratched or sprayed on a wall. That kind of language.”

Rich believes in what Marx says that “Language is the presence of the community” and she has tried hard to represent that community, the common human beings, in her poetry. The title of Rich's The Dream of a Common Language reminds us of Wordsworth's advocacy of a “common” language for poetry in his preface to the Lyrical Ballads. Wordsworth was rebelling against an extremely refined poetic language that limited the audience of poetry along class lines. Like Adrienne Rich, Wordsworth's aim was to restore, through poetry, the integrity and value of emotional life, which connects us together as human beings below layers of rationality and civilized behaviour. But Rich is profoundly against Wordsworth's dictum that “the poet is a man speaking to men”. For her, the poet is a woman.
speaking to other women, and her "dream of a common language" symbolizes her desire to address that audience. Though she explains elsewhere "the point ... is not the 'exclusion' of men: it is that primary presence of women to ourselves and each other ... which is the crucible of a new language."

The concept of "dream of a common language" has provoked much critical debate as to what it exactly means. The word "common" is interpreted in different ways — plain and ordinary on the one hand, accessible and shared on the other — but the meaning of "dream" is equally important, implying an aim, the visionary state of poetic thinking, may be a second language, preconscious and unbroken, like a rockshelf of linguistic resource underlying poetry in general. For a feminist poet the status of language as she finds it will be a very difficult problem, "a knot of lies / eating at itself to get undone." How can the integrity of female experience be kept intact once "rendered in the oppressor's language"? Rich's answer to this question is implicit in her sense that "Only where there is language is there world." Her language is time's strong vernacular, the idiom of being-in-the-world where "being" is female and "the world" as always, is still a kingdom of the fathers. Against the patriarchal theoretical system she places her art and her life because it is a system given to conquest and illusions of mastery, hostile to earth and the flesh.

(i) Theoretical Perspectives on Language and Power

Developments in the field of language during the 1950s and 60s, proved that language was no more merely a passive mode of communication, conveying ideas and experience. The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), challenged the concept that language was a "natural" phenomenon, just "there in effect". He proposed that
language is an arbitrary and conventional system: arbitrary in the sense that there is no inherent relationship between the word and its meaning. Meanings are attributed to the words by the human mind which are maintained by conventions. It follows that if language as a sign system is constructed by such arbitrariness then it is not a reflection of the world and of experience, but a system that is quite separate from it. Clarifying it further, he said that language constitutes our world, it does not just record it or name it. Language itself constructs, shapes and predetermines what we perceive and think. Therefore, all ‘reality’ is constructed through language, and nothing exists as being simply ‘there’ in an unquestionable way – everything is a linguistic/textual construct. Thus, instead of people constructing language to their own ends, they are shaped and constructed by language. For Saussure language is basically a social phenomenon, not individual:

The arbitrary nature of the sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up: by himself the individual is incapable of fixing a single value.10

In the 1950s the British philosopher J.L. Austin evolved the concept of the performative nature of language. Performatives, instead of describing, actually perform the action to which they refer. They are neither true nor false, but rather appropriate or inappropriate according to the situation or ‘felicitous’ or ‘infelicitous’ to use Austin’s terminology. Austin says that the sentence ‘I promise to pay you’ is not narrating any state of affairs but performing the act of promising: the statement is itself the act. Adding another dimension to this theory of performatives, Jacques Derrida puts that performatives can only function in the larger spheres of
conventions where they identify themselves as forms of or quotations of regular formulas. Giving the example of a marriage ceremony where the priest asks the man “Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife” and the man replies “I do”. Derrida points out that if the man says “OK” rather than “I do” he may not get married. He says that if the formulation does not repeat a “codified” form or is not identifiable as conforming to an iterative model it will not have the desired result. So language is performative because it does not simply convey a message but also performs acts by conforming itself to the established discursive practices.

Conforming to a deeper and more crucial role of language in constructing and defining the identity and location of the individuals in social configuration Hélène Cixous points and that:

no political reflection can dispense with reflection on language, with work on language. For as soon as we exist we are born into language and language speaks (to) us, dictates its law. a law of death: it lays down its familial model, lays down its conjugal model, and even at the moment of uttering a sentence, admitting a notion of ‘being’, a question of being, an ontology, we are already seized by a certain kind of masculine desire, the desire that mobilizes philosophical discourse.¹¹

Women’s relation with language becomes all the more important as they themselves serve as the “signs” of communication between different groups in the patriarchal culture, as Claude Lévi-Strauss points out in his book The Elementary Structures of Kinship (1969). For Lévi-Strauss marriage is a kind of human communication as it operates basically like a linguistic system: the exchange of women in marriage confirms the
continuity of the social set up, while the exchange of words performs a similar action for the linguistic system. He says: "The emergence of symbolic thought must have required that women, like words, should be things that were exchanged". In a society defined and dominated by man, woman can only be seen under two incompatible aspects: as "the object of personal desire" and as "the subject of the desire of others" or the relational sign between men. Thus the focal point of Lévi-Strauss is that a woman is both a person and a sign, a human being and a depersonalized entity, so her relationship with language - of women and/in language - will depend on whether she is taken as being a person or a sign.

Exposing the politics at work in language and the role it plays in creating the power groups in society rendering the other powerless, Lévi-Strauss argues that in a marriage ceremony the sentence "I now pronounce you man and wife". The word "man" points to the essence of a male being, while the word "wife" presents woman not as a person, in her essence, but as a dependence, simply as a relational sign. It echoes Simone de Beauvoir's well known assertion: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her. she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other". In order to achieve equality between man and woman this statement should be changed to either "I now pronounce you man and woman" or "I now pronounce you husband and wife". The change of words in the statement shows how marital relationship is viewed in the patriarchal system and how it plays the politics of rendering women to a lower subject position in society, and how such a statement perpetuates sexual discrimination. But one thing which, from the point of view of language, is important is that marriage, before becoming a social reality, is a verbal deed. The speech act that legalises and institutes marriage is preceded by a
dialogue between both the participants who perform a speech act by answering “I do” to the question “Do you take this woman or this man to be your lawful wedded wife or husband”? Thus marriage becomes a text, where legal, social and emotional aspects are formed by language. The words “I” and “thou” of the marital utterance are not simply linguistic signs, signifiers which do not ascribe specific human beings, but depersonalised structural subjects. The participants are speaking subjects, performing their roles in a very mechanistic fashion, speaking the script, whether they acknowledge it or not, that have been written by yet another subject, which Tzvetan Todorov calls, “the subject of enunciation”. The subject of enunciation, is not any person identifiable through biographical or psychological information but rather a strategic position, a structure indifferent to individual wishes, what Michel Foucault calls the “author-function”. The subject of enunciation, says Nelly Furman, “delineates the choices available to individual writers and reveal the position they take in established forms of discourse”. Patriarchal system works as the subject of enunciation for whatever happens in society. All discourses are necessarily regulated and defined by the patriarchal cultural values. Therefore, as Stephen Heath explains:

... any answer to the questions posed will be in terms of the identification of a discourse that is finally masculine, not because of some conception of theory as male but because in the last resort any discourse which fails to take account of the problem of sexual difference in its enunciation and address will be, within a patriarchal order, precisely indifferent, a reflection of male domination.

Theories of the 1960s suggest that language and socio-historical events are inseparably bound with each other, and particular situations
produce particular kinds of language which in turn shape and determine events. Language is produced by a definite set of social relations which operate at a certain time and place. This kind of language is never impartial or ideologically free, but shaped to transmit particular kinds of knowledge designed to conform to the machinations of power and domination seeking to achieve control over human life.

This view of language as an instrument of political and social control in which 'truth' becomes more relative and practical rather than absolute and ideal, working only in a specific historical context, was promulgated most effectively by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Revealing the nexus working between language, knowledge, truth, and power he says that Western history cannot be separated from the way 'truth' is produced and inscribes its effects. We live in a society which to a great extent marches in time with truth—by truth he meant that ours is a society which produces and circulates discourse with a truth function, discourse which passes for the truth and holds specific powers.18

Thus, the social world is made up of a plurality of discourses originating and operating around the institutions which they are part of: the discourses of gender and race have been functioning with slight changes throughout Western history in ways that give importance to certain groups and naturalize the inferiorization of others.

Once the power of politics in language, in the construction of the entire face of society has been exposed, it becomes too naïve to think of literature as something separate from the world or that it just reflects the world in a passive and mirror-like way. The new theoretical knowledge rejects this mimetic view of literature and questions the position of literature as a transcendental, aesthetic sovereign and as a privileged mode of discourse. It says that it is as much a part and product of the world as any

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other signifying process and is as much a part of reality as a reflection on it. In her study of some of the major works of American fiction, Judith Fetterley shows how literature under the garb of universality is discriminatory in nature. She writes that:

> One of the main things that keeps the design of our literature unavailable to the consciousness of the woman reader, and hence impalpable, is the very posture of the apolitical, the pretence that literature speaks universal truths through forms from which all the merely personal, the purely subjective, has been burned away or at least transformed through the medium of art into the representative. When only one reality is encouraged, legitimized, and transmitted and when that limited vision endlessly insists on comprehensiveness, then we have the conditions necessary for that confusion of consciousness in which impalpability flourishes.¹⁹

In her examination she deconstructs a few fictional works to expose how men’s attitudes towards women mould their form and content. Thus, she gives rise to a new reality and new vision bringing a different subjectivity to bear on the so-called transcendental nature of literature.

Fetterley says that American literature is masculine in nature and a simple study of the canon reveals and tries to impose its male identity, though it claims to be universal but that universality is defined specifically in male terms. In fiction, for example, as in Mailer’s *An American Dream*, the writer is so possessed by the power that sexism brings to men that he is prepared to transcend any limits to maintain it. He creates conditions where the supremacy of men over women can be repeatedly exemplified. The pains Mailer undergoes here to conceal the issue, blur the reality, and
confound the consciousness are so frenzied that the antithesis he constructs
to defend his thesis becomes in fact his message. and his confusions shed a
pallid illumination. The ritual of scapegoating to expurgate all the ills of a
person is entirely male: the sacrificial scapegoat is the woman/wife and the
purged survivor is the man/husband. Such fictions invite the female reader
to participate in an experience. she has already been exiled from: she is
required to identify with a person whose definition is opposed to hers thus,
she is forced to search for an identity in a space where nothing relates to
her. Literature is permeated with examples of “immasculation” of women
by men. They are always trained to think as men. to identify with a male
dream and to approve the male system of values as natural and legitimate,
where misogyny is the central principle.

In her paper “Women and the Literary Curriculum”. Elaine exposes
the process of Showalter immasculation through the medium of literature.
She says that the average young woman entering college comes to
understand that the texts in her course are

selected for their timelessness. or their relevance. or their
power to involve the reader. rather than for their absolute
standing in the literary canon. Thus she might be assigned any
one of the texts which have recently been advertised for
Freshman English: an anthology of essays, perhaps such as
*The Responsible Man.* ‘for the student who wants literature
relevant to the world in which he lives’. or *Conditions of Men,*
or *Man in Crisis: Perspectives on The Individual and His
World,* or again, *Representative Men: Cult Heroes of Our
Time.* ... By the end of her freshman year. a woman student
would have learned something about intellectual neutrality;
she would be learning in fact. how to think like a man.
Evaluating "the effects of this long apprenticeship in negative capability on the self-image and the self-confidence of women students" that lead to self-hatred and self-doubt. Showalter concludes: that Women are estranged from their own experience and unable to perceive its shape and authenticity they are expected to identity as readers with a masculine experience and perspective, which is presented as the human one. Since they have no faith in the validity of their own perceptions and experiences, rarely seeing them confirmed in literature, or accepted in criticism, can we wonder that women students are so often timid, cautious, and insecure when we exhort them to 'think for themselves'?"21

Thus, the condition of a female reader becomes awkward intellectually she is male, thinking like male, imagining herself male but sexually female, she has in fact no identity of her own. Exclusion from a literature which paves the path towards crystallization of one's identity is to experience a particular form of powerlessness. This powerlessness is not merely the result of one's negation to allow one's experience to be articulated, defined, and realised in art and literature but as Judith Fetterley puts, it springs from "the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation of identity as male while being reminded that to be male – to be universal, to be American – is to be not female" 22 Elizabeth Hampsten too voices the same concern in her article "A Woman's Map of Lyric Poetry." Alluding to Thomas Campion's "My Sweetest Lesbia", she puts forth the question, "And Lesbia, what's in it for her?"24 As Lillian Robinson suggests, "and, always, cui bono – who profits" 25 The questions "who profits", and "how" are decisive as they clearly expose the deeply entrenched drama of literary sexual politics.

Contemporary feminisms have included the wide ranging political implications of language in their political agenda. The question 'why is
language a feminist issue? has many deep-rooted implications which force a feminist to question her very identity and through this questioning achieve her true self. This examination is a pointer to the process of how women have been silenced and excluded from language. This introspection becomes instrumental in discovering a female voice. It also helps in unraveling how “naming” has been a totally male prerogative which actually accounts for the misrepresentation of the identity of women in art and literature.

Speaking about the inauthenticity and alienation of a woman's voice in patriarchy. Mary Daly writes in Man Made Language:

The fact is that the female saying ‘I’ is alien at every moment to her own speaking and writing. She is broken by the fact that she must enter this language in order to speak or write. As the ‘I’ is broken, so also is the Inner Eye, the capacity for integrity of knowing/sensing. In this way the Inner Voice of the Self’s integrity is silenced: the external voice babbles in alien and alienating tongues.26

This does not mean that women have always and everywhere been silent but they could never use it to their advantage. Their reach to language is severely limited, as Rebecca Hiscock observes that gossip, story telling, private letters, and diaries have been the only genres available to women which itself speaks of the politics involved in the assignment of roles as none of these are prestigious enough, and some, like gossip, are actually depreciated. These are private forms of language, limited to the boundaries of home; in the public sphere, which includes culture, religion and all the institutionalized knowledge these genres have no reputation and currency.27
This silencing of women is actually the reason of an absence of female voice and concern within a higher culture. It is not that women cannot or do not speak, but rather they are severely restricted from speaking, either by social taboos and restrictions or by the so called rules and regulations of custom and practice which are ironically applicable only to women. Even where it seems that they could speak, if they decided, the conditions forced upon their lives by society make this difficult. Silence is sometimes chosen by women so to save themselves from being ridiculed or attacked. Anthropologists have reported of societies, where restrictions were formulated as regulations with severe punishments attached to their violation, where women were denied the right to speak in public or in the presence of men or where they could not use certain words and expressions. Actually, powerful groups fear that the ability to read and write, if it is allowed to the powerless, will facilitate opposition and threat to the hegemonial position of the powerful group. As Alice Walker clearly states:

What does it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grand-mothers’ time? In our great-grand-mothers’ day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood. How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century ... it was a punishable crime for a black person to read and write.\(^{28}\)

It shows how Black women were totally denied any reach to literacy and the extent to which they underwent penalties and punishments for any effort to acquire it. Almost the same has been the fate of women all over the world who tried to enter into the privileged realm of knowledge and learning reserved only for men. Speaking of poetry as a privileged meta-language in Western patriarchal culture Cora Kaplan writes that though other written forms of high culture - theology, philosophy, political theory,
drama, and prose fiction – are also, in part, "language about language, in
poetry this introverted or doubled relation is thrust at us as the very reason-
for-being of the genre." Men have been involved in a politics to keep
women away from this privileged way of writing. Writing is not an organic
growth out of general linguistic abilities, but a technology: and like other
technologies it has been monopolized by the powerful.

In a very interesting study of Romantic poetry, J.R. de J. Jackson in
his *Romantic Poetry by Women: A Bibliography* (1993) mentions that there
were 1,402 first editions of volumes of poetry published by women during
1770 and 1835. This statistical data shows that most Romantic poets were
women. It is difficult to assign any reason other than sexism for the fact that
all of this body of work has until very recently been totally unacknowledged
and most people generally know Romantic poetry by the Big Six (Blake,
Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats). He argues that it
certainly cannot be said that all 1,402 books were carefully and critically
examined and regretfully put aside as inferior, because what seems likely to
have happened, though never documented, is that Romantic poetry is
something men wrote and women did not because they could not or should
not. But what makes the present extremely interesting is that generations of
course cultural amnesia is being replaced by a pleasant rediscovery of a
sizable extent of the achievements of the past.

Perhaps the most clear example of this deep-seated sexism is the then
Poet Laureate Robert Southey’s letter to the young Charlotte Bronte who
wrote to him in 1837 for advice as she set out on her career as a writer. He
replied:

Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it
ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties.
the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation.\textsuperscript{31}

Southey’s attitude, in spite of his being the Poet Laureate, clearly exhibits the prevalent prejudice in the dominant culture that women writers in the period had to negotiate their way round if they were to exist as writers at all.

Grappling for reasons of female inferiority in expression of language Cora Kaplan says that the predominance of male perspectives expressed in common and high speech are on account of the taboo imposed on the female child. She talks about two extremely prominent and distinct stages at which the woman’s clearly weaker position in language is fixed. The first stage, the Oedipal stage, where the child, constructed as a speaking subject, has to admit sex difference and conform herself with women and restricted speech. The second stage, which is puberty, further broadens distinctions between girls and boys with the appearance of adult sex difference and reach to public discourse outlined for men.

In a painting by Odilon Redon a woman’s face in ivory cameo, enclosed in a green oval mist, holding two fingers to her lips, and a cupped paw to her ear has been picturised. It is titled Silence. Commanding silence, she is its material image. A speaking silence – image and command united – she is herself spoken to. in fact spoken twice - first by the artist who has placed his silence in a female figure. and secondly by the viewer who takes as natural this abstract identification of woman – silence and commentary imaging of women’s speech as whispered. subvocal. the mere escape of trapped air ... s h h h h h h.

Kaplan argues that her speech seems more restricted by some function in which she is enclosed as deeply as in the embryonic mist.
Whatever role she plays, the silence she commands and enacts is on behalf of some sleeping other. She says.

In enforcing our silence and her own she seems to protect someone else's speech. Her silence and muted speech ... is both chosen and imposed by the acceptance of her femininity. It has none of the illusory freedom of choice that we associate with a taciturn male. It is not the silence of chosen isolation either, for even in a painting significantly without other figures it is an inextricably social silence.32

A very important debate within the study of sexism in language is the question of *naming*, how the issues of gender are represented in languages. Feminists have always argued that "those who have the power to name the world are in a position to influence reality".33 They say that women lack this power and consequently many a female experience remains without a name. This *absence* of words for certain feelings and ideas of women, those the male language-makers have decided not to 'name', exposes the politics of sexism in language, because these experiences do not fit in with the official male world-view. In absence of the proper words to express the feelings and ideas of women they may remain drifting, and unacknowledged by the majority, thus our languages are not proper carriers for conveying women's most pressing concerns. Women feel that most of the existing languages, instead of helping them in expressing their true self, come in their way to self-realization and make them alien to themselves. As Monique Wittig puts it. "The women say, the language you speak poisons your glottis, tongue, palate, lips. They say, the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you. They say, the language you speak is made up of signs that rightly speaking designate what men have appropriated".34
In her book *Beyond God the Father*, Mary Daly writes that “Women have had the power of *naming* stolen from us. We have not been free to use, our own power, to name ourselves, the world, or God”. Languages are sexist; that is, they ‘name’ the world from a masculine point of view and according to the stereotyped beliefs about the sexes. She points out that in the mythology of the Judeo-Christian world it is ‘man’ as Adam who gives names to God’s creation. This male monopoly of naming has far reaching results. Many feminists believe that the names given to the world are not mere reflections of reality, nor arbitrary signifiers with no relation to it. Rather, they claim, the names are a culture’s strategy of fixing what will ultimately become reality in a world of overwhelming chaotic sensations, all pregnant with a number of possible meanings. It is not simply a matter of certain words being sexist, but of sexism entering into different levels of language from morphology to stylistic conventions in specific ‘fields’ of discourse, which are less general and more contextual. One has to be conscious while considering different fields of discourse in different terms, as conventions of sexism in discussions of poetry are different from that of rape reporting. Even the underlying assumptions are different from each other. Thus ‘sexist language’ cannot be taken as simply the ‘naming’ of the world from one, phallocentric perspective; it is better conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon occurring in a number of quite complex systems of representations, each of them having a historical background.

Actually, our linguistic practices often reveal and perpetuate ideas about things which do not come under law, but have great cultural importance. This is one of the reasons that feminists have emphasized on language and discourse so enormously: our ways of talking about things expose the hidden attitudes and assumptions we may not accept consciously, thus examining the deep-seatedness of sexism. To reveal this
sexism at work in language, we can examine two reports of an incident related to a married couple whose home was broken into. The first report from the Daily Telegraph says:

A man who suffered head injuries when attacked by two men who broke into his home in Beckenham, Kent, early yesterday, was pinned down on the bed by intruders who took it in turns to rape his wife.36

The second report is from the Sun.

A terrified 19-stone husband was forced to lie next to his wife as two men raped her yesterday.37

What is surprising here is that the act of rape is being projected as a crime against a man rather than a woman. It is the experience of the man in this incident which is foregrounded in both reports. He is the first person to be mentioned, and also the grammatical subject of the main clause. What is important for a feminist to see is that he is the subject of verbs suffered and was forced, while we can meaningfully inquire who is the one actually forced and suffers in a rape. The woman - in both reports referred as “his wife” – is mentioned only in the end of a long complex sentence. Her rape comes, in the Daily Telegraph, after the man’s “head injuries” and the violation of “his home”. and in the Sun, the rape itself is less shocking than the fact that the husband was forced to witness it.

This analysis shows that it is not only through certain words but also through the arrangement of words and the total representation and picturization of an incident that sexism can be gleaned. As there are no words, except a symmetrical lack between man and wife in the Daily Telegraph report, which can be charged of sexism. we need to focus on specific “discursive practices " where sexist assumptions are embodied by
linguistic choices, than to go on emphasizing that ‘language’ is generally and universally sexist in itself. Here Dale Spender’s notion of male-controlled or “man-made language” becomes significant as it recognises the importance of human agency in constructing and changing linguistic practice. Thus, we are required to examine languages as cultural structures whose norms are secured in things like dictionaries, grammars, style books, and glossaries – each of which has historically been compiled and arranged by men.

There is yet another area which draws the feminists’ attention pertaining to the different styles of language – specially speech – used by women and men and the areas women have been excluded from. There have been many prejudices against women’s speech which have historically been backed and supported by the male dominated culture. From Jonathan Swift, who, in _A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue_. 1712, developing the malignant influence of women on language, opined that women’s language abounds in vowels and liquids, to the 20th century linguist Otto Jespersen, who, criticizing women for their lack of innovation, called their language “languid and insipid” while he referred to men as “the chief innovators of language”. Women’s language has been criticized without showing any authentic proof for such criticism. Many people may agree with Jespersen calling women’s language “a set of pearls joined together on a string of ands”. but the linguist Robin Lakoff, in her pioneering work _Language and Woman’s Place_ refers to these lacks as political and cultural constructs rather than as natural sex differences. She believes that women are forcefully made to learn a feeble, trifling, and deferential style as part of their socialization, which is essentially a training for their subordination. She considers women’s style as a reflection of their powerlessness and men’s power over them.
Another approach accepts the differences in language by men and women, but instead of taking them as signs of inferiority, it calls them the authentic manifestation of a female culture. This approach is supported by Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Annie Leclerc, Deborah Jones and many others who believe that if we can stop evaluating things by sexist male standards, the aspects now tagged "trivial", "trifling" and "deferential" will appear as "women-centered" and "supportive".

Aware of the politics of literature to keep women silent, restricted, and therefore powerless. Adrienne Rich poses a fundamental question regarding what is to be done if the very language and literature, that should be aimed at endowing knowledge and freedom to the reader, is used to restrict the reader's freedom and to convince her of her unworthiness to collaborate in the production of the work? Adrienne Rich has no illuminating answer to this question, but simply to question and revise the notion of the "classic" which has been used as a term of "unquestioning idolatry":

Revision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is a part of our refusal of the self–destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a
male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh. A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old patriarchal order re-assert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it, not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.40

This energizing encounter with literature is in essence a mode of interpretation that will give women the power of renaming or naming in a new perspective. The purpose of the re-visioning is to make women the resisting readers than the acquiescing readers. By refusing to acquiesce, they can start the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in them. As a result of this exercise the texts will no longer be studied the way they have been studied and thus they will lose their power to trap women unknowingly to their designs. It offers feminist readings of texts which examine the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism and women-as-sign in semiotic systems. This is revolutionary in content as most alternative feminist reading has not been able to accomplish this task. But Adrienne Rich cautions women that this task of examining and exploring literature is a difficult one, as they attempt to find language and images, for a consciousness they are just coming into, and with nothing in the past to support them.

To clarify this further Rich sets out to answer the questions posed by the anthropologist, Jane Harrison. Harrison inquires: “why do women never want to write poetry about Man as a sex—why is woman a dream and terror to man and not the other way round? Is it mere convention and propriety, or something deeper?” 41 These questions cut deep into the myth-
making tradition, the relationship of men and women, and the psyche of the woman writer. Rich says that historically men and women have performed very different roles in each others’ lives. While woman has been a luxury for man, been used as the painter’s model, and poets muse, and has worked as a nurse, cook and bearer of his seed, man has performed a totally different role for the female artist. Rich gives an example of how language has been manipulated by the male writers for their benefit and how the sexual politics works in day-to-day life that denies any space for a woman writer.

Henry James in his article “Notes on Novelists”, repeated an incident described by the writer Prosper Merimee who had spent a night with George Sand:

He once opened his eyes, in the raw winter dawn, to see his companion, in a dressing-gown, on her knees before the domestic hearth, a candle-stick beside her and a red madras round her head, making bravely, with her own hands the fire that was to enable her to sit down betimes to urgent pen and paper. The story represents him as having felt that the spectacle chilled his ardor and tried his taste; her appearance was unfortunate, her occupation an inconsequence, and her industry a reproof – the result of all which was a lively irritation and an early rupture.42

Adrienne Rich says that this kind of male judgement, along with the misnaming and baffling of her needs by a culture controlled by males, has caused great problems for the woman writer: the problems of contact with herself, problems of language and style, problems of energy and survival.
In the writings of Sylvia Plath and Diana Wakoski, Man is presented as, if not a dream, a fascination and a terror, and the source of this fascination and terror is nothing but Man’s power – to control, to oppress, to select, or reject the woman. And, in the poetry of both these women, it is ultimately the woman’s sense of herself – embattled, possessed – that confers to poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will, and female energy. In Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, Rich finds a “sense of effort, of pains taken, of dogged tentativeness” in the love, which reminds her of her own situation. This tone is the tone of a woman who knows her anger but has decided not to appear angry, who is “willing” herself to be quiet, isolated, and even “charming” in a room full of men where things have been talked about which assault her very integrity. Virginia Woolf wrote for women but was aware of the male presence so she drew the language out into an exacerbated thread in her determination to express her own sensibility and yet guard it from the masculine presences. It is only occasionally that the passion in her voice can be heard: she tried to sound as calm as Jane Austen, as Olympian as Shakespeare, because that is the way the men of culture desired a writer should sound.

(ii) Adrienne Rich’s Views on Language and Power

Adrienne Rich is of the view that men have never written especially for women or keeping in view women’s criticism when they pick up their materials, themes and language. But on the contrary all women write for men even when, like Virginia Woolf, they are supposed to be addressing women. Rich finds the cause of this incapability of women writers to write about women only in their inability to handle the language which is masculine by nature. Rich says that when a women writer:
goes to poetry or fiction looking for her way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together: she is looking carefully for guides, maps, possibilities: and over and over in the ‘words’ masculine persuasive force’ of literature she comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of woman in the books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream. she finds a beautiful pale face. she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci. she finds Juliet or I’ess or Salome but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself. who sits at a desk trying to put words together.14

Adrienne Rich offers a revision of the androcentric texts and strategies from a feminist perspective as an important step for dismantling the sexual politics involved to keep women away and incapable to use language and literature for the expression of the turmoil going within and without their lives. The critique of androcentric reading strategies is essential, for it opens up some ideological space for the recuperation of women’s writing. Women will have to choose, as Rich writes of Emily Dickinson, in her poem “I am in Danger – Sir –”, to have the argument out at last on their own premises.

In her exemplary essay: “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson”. Adrienne Rich presents a tacit commentary on the process of reading women’s writing. While a feminist study of male texts appeals to women to be resisting readers. Rich offers three metaphors that announce a very different attitude towards her subject.
The methods, the exclusions of Emily Dickinson’s exercise could not have been my own: yet more and more, as a woman poet finding my own methods, I have come to understand her necessities, could have served as witness in her defense.45

I am travelling at the speed of time, along the Massachusetts Turnpike .... ‘Home is not where the heart is’. she wrote in a letter, ‘but the house and adjacent buildings … I am travelling at the speed of time, in the direction of the house and buildings…. For years. I have been not so much envisioning Emily Dickinson as trying to visit, to enter her mind through her poems and letters, and through my own intimations of what it could have meant to be one of the two mid-nineteenth century American geniuses. and a woman. living in Amherst. Massachusetts.46

For months, for most of my life. I have been hovering like an insect against the screens of an existence which inhabited Amherst. Massachusetts between 1830 and 1886.... Here [in Dickinson’s bedroom] I become again. an insect. vibrating at the flames of windows. clinging to the panes of glass. trying to connect.47

The first is the example of judicial metaphor where the feminist reader presents herself as a witness in defence of the woman writer. Here gender plays a very important role. The feminist reader comes forward to defend the woman writer against patriarchal misreadings that try to distort her work and make it insignificant. The second metaphor refers to a principal doctrine of feminist criticism that a literary work cannot be understood in isolation from the social, historical and cultural contexts...
within which it was written. As if to agree to the condition Dickinson had imposed on her friends. Rich travels through space and time to visit the poet on her own premises. She goes to Amherst to visit the house at 280 Main Street where Dickinson lived. She visits her corner bedroom on the second floor that had been “freedom” for her. Rich, ultimately, tries to get in Dickinson's mind, but to achieve this it is not enough to read her poems and letters. To get into her mind and heart, one must take a journey through “the house and adjacent buildings”.

Why did Dickinson choose seclusion? Why did she write poems she would not publish? What did these poems about queens, volcanoes, deserts, eternity, passion, suicide, rape, power, madness, the demon, the grave mean? Rich considers all these questions as related with one another, as for her the revisionary reading of Dickinson’s work is a part of the revisionary re-reading of her life. Rich writes that:

I have a notion that genius knows itself: that Dickinson chose her seclusion, knowing she was exceptional and knowing what she needed. It was, moreover, no hermetic retreat, but a seclusion which included a wide range of people, of reading and correspondence…. she carefully selected her society and controlled the disposal of her time. Not only the ‘gentlewomen in plush’ of Amherst were excluded: Emerson visited next door but she did not go to meet him…. Given her vocation, she was neither eccentric nor quaint; she was determined to survive, to use her powers, to practice necessary economies.48

Rich believes that to write the kind of poetry which penetrates so far beyond the ideology of the “feminine” and the conventions of womanly feelings. Emily Dickinson had to “enter the chambers of the self in which
Ourself behind ourself. concealed -

Should startle most -

and to relinquish control there, to take those risks, she had to create a relationship to the other world where she could feel in control” 49

The metaphor of visiting presents another aspect of feminist readings of women’s writing: the practice of interpreting the text not as an object but as the revelation of the subjectivity of the absent author – the “voice” of another woman. 1 or Rich reading Dickinson’s poems and letters is not enough, these are the doorways to the “mind” of a “woman of genius”. So she uses her imagination and her rhetorical power to “evoke the figure of powerful will”50 who is at the heart of the text. To read Dickinson, then, is to try to visit her, to listen to her voice, to make her live in oneself, and to feel her impressive “personal dimensions”. But Rich clearly knows that visiting Dickinson is simply a metaphor for reading her poetry, as she acknowledges in the third metaphor. In reading, one encounters only a text while the author is absent. Probably the most striking rhetorical device employed by Rich in this essay is her use of the personal voice. Her approach to Dickinson is deliberately and brazenly subjective.

Rich’s metaphors together with her use of the personal voice indicate some key issues underlying feminist readings of female texts. On the one hand, reading is essentially subjective. On the other hand, it should not be so completely. One should respect the autonomy of the text. The reader is a visitor and should follow the primary laws. She must avoid unwarranted intrusions – she must be careful not to confiscate what belongs to her host. Not to force herself upon the other woman. Furthermore, reading is at once an inter-subjective encounter and something less than that. In reading Dickinson, Rich tries to enter her mind, to feel her presence. But there is a
screen, an inanimate object. Its subjectivity is only a projection of the subjectivity of the reader.

Adrienne Rich proposes the central inspiration, the regulative ideal, that constructs the feminist reader’s approach to these issues. If feminist readings of male texts are inspired by the need to disrupt the process of immasculation. feminist readings of female texts are inspired by the need “to connect”, to revive, or to formulate the context, the tradition, that would connect women writers to one author, to women readers and critics, and to the large community of women. Of course, the revival of such a context is an essential ground for the non-repressive unification of women’s point of view and culture into the study of a Humanities that is worthy of its name.

Adrienne Rich has always been aware of the power of language to transform and change our lives. Language has a real and tangible importance in the lives of women. She says:

When we become acutely, disturbingly aware of the language we are using and that is using us, we begin to grasp a material resource that women have never before collectively attempted to repossess … as long as our language is inadequate, our vision remains formless, our thinking and feeling are still running in the old cycles. our process may be “revolutionary” but not transformative.51

Rich emphasizes the inauthenticity and alienation of women’s experience in patriarchy. She believes that the inauthenticity of our language may undermine our capacity to transform ourselves and the world we live in, however we can find an authentic self through a process of personal and political transformation. For Rich, language is among the most important sources of women’s present alienation, and if they do not pay
attention to it all their labour for transformation will go waste. And if they start paying attention, it is also potentially a resource of their transformation. Language “breaks” us; but if repossessed it can also remake us.

Emphasizing the necessity of poetry, a criticism of language, in the modern world. Rich says that it becomes all the more important as many people still think that language is “only words” and that an old language is capable enough to describe the world we are trying to transform. Poetry, she says, by simply arranging words in new configurations and establishing relationships between words created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme, can do wonders and make us hear and see our words in a new dimension:

I am the wall at the lip of the water
I am the rock that refused to be battered
I am the dyke in the matter, the other
I am the wall with the womanly swagger…”

Her entire work sustains her belief that, “Poetry is above all a concentration of the power of language which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe”.

But women have. Rich says, not been allowed to use poetry to speak out of women collectively, of women alone, of women as anything but the fantasies of men. It is as if “forces we can lay claim in no other way”.

Rich realizes that patriarchal culture has deprived women of the time and space required to create literature. The period, college years, when women can make literature, they are given the male writers to study, and in fact literature itself has been lost, misread and kept away from them. Therefore, in the absence of women’s poetry i.e. language, it is almost impossible to imagine and name the sensations, longings, hunger, alienation which die silently in the hearts of women “unnamed” and “unnameable” and “mistranslated”.

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Even in the modern times women fear to express explicitly what they feel. Poet Judy Grahn, who wrote “A Woman Is Talking To Death”, a poem of bitter lamentation which paved a new path for poetry making use of the “new words” which were written by women, writing entirely to and for women, was so frightened that she decided not to write poetry for a while. The subtle presentation of images of death at work are constantly informed by the authors’ own experiences, testimony in trials that never got heard - historical violence against women, including feudal wives, witches and the rape victims; the degradation of the poor, the black and the women to non-human status: the violence- of neglect, of rejection, of severe brutality or accidental torture – that the powerless inflict on themselves and each other: the exploitation of female mind and body by the patriarchal culture. It is through the power of language that the seemingly unconnected pieces produce the effect of a musical whole exposing the contradictions of the patriarchal culture which not only blames the victim but sets her to blaming other victims and in this way makes the wheel of powerlessness moving.

(iii) Body and Language

Many feminists make a very strong connection between language and their body, especially the female body and perceive it as a positive relation. They believe that anatomy is textuality. In fact, organic or biological criticism is one of the most “sibylline” and perplexing theoretical formulations of feminist criticism, as Elaine Showalter terms it. Though feminist criticism rejects the literal biological inferiority, some theorists seem to accept the metaphorical implications of female biological difference in writing. Gilbert and Gubar in The Madwoman in the Attic, frame their analysis of women’s writing around metaphors of literary paternity. They maintain that: “In patriarchal western culture … the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose
pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis.” Women’s writing, as it lacks phallic authority, is greatly marked by the anxieties of this difference: “If the pen is a metaphorical penis, from what organ can females generate texts?” Though they do not give any answer to this question, but it is a serious question of much feminist theoretical discourse.

Adrienne Rich and other feminists have taken up this question very seriously and have come forward to rethink and redefine biological differentiation and its relation to women’s writing. They argue that women’s writing begins from the body and their sexual differentiation is their source. In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich makes her declaration:

I have come to believe, as will be clear throughout this book, that female biology - the diffuse, intense sexuality radiating out from clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina, the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body – has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons: it will. I believe, come to view our physicality as a source, rather than a destiny, in order to live a fully human life we require not only control of our bodies (though control is a prerequisite); we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence. Rich believes that the male fear for the female capacity to create life has manifested itself in different forms of hatred for every aspect of female
creativity. To curb this creativity, women have been forced to stick to motherhood and their faculties looked down upon as inferior. "inappropriate", "inconsequential", an attempt to become "like men", or an escape from their "real" duties: marriage and childbearing. Rich says that this notion to "think like a man" has been both "praise and prison" for women who make an effort to escape the body-trap. This has lead many women to claim that they are first "human beings" and women just by chance. Rich believes that female body has been made so problematic for women that they prefer to shrug it off and live as a "disembodied spirit". But with new inquiries into the actual power inherent in female biology, women are starting to change their ideas and look at it beyond the maternal function. Rich herself decided "to heal the separation between mind and body; never again to loose myself both psychically and physically in that way". For Rich body is the source of all her inspiration and ideas:

The will to change begins in the body not in the mind
My politics is in my body, occurring and expending with every act of resistance and each of my failures.
Locked in the closet at four years old I beat the wall with my body that act is in me still.
No, not completeness:
but I needed a way of saying
(this is what they are afraid of)
that could deal with these fragments
I needed to touch you
with a hand, a body
but also with words
I need a language to hear myself with
to see myself in."
This championing of body has come under criticism from different quarters of feminist criticism. Feminists fear that this invocation of anatomy risks a return to the crude essentialism, the phallic and ovarian theories of art, that oppressed women in the past. A critic who writes from the body tends to be confessional and often innovative in style and form. But such criticism makes itself extremely vulnerable, as the professional taboos against self-revelation are very strong. However, when it achieves success, it is given the power and dignity of art. Its existence is a tacit admonition to female critics who keep on writing, according to Adrienne Rich, from somewhere outside their female bodies.

But Adrienne Rich’s preoccupation with the “corporeal ground of our intelligence” has been criticised as it can become acutely prescriptive. There is a possibility here in which this revelation of bloody wounds becomes an introductory ritual totally separate and disconnected from critical insight. The dissident French feminist journal Questions Feministes puts it’s argument in these terms:

It is at times said that women’s language is closer to the body, to sexual pleasure, to direct sensations and so on, which means that the body could express itself directly without special mediation and that, moreover, this closeness to the body and to nature would be subversive. In our opinion, there is no such thing as a direct relation to the body. To advocate a direct relation to the body is therefore not subversive because it is equivalent to denying the reality and strength of social mediations, the very same ones that oppress us in our bodies. At most, one would advocate a different socialization of the body, but without searching for a true and eternal nature, for this search takes us away from the most effective struggle.
against the socio-historical contexts in which human beings are and will always be trapped.\(^{60}\)

This critique concentrates on the fundamentally social nature of the body itself. Actually the authors think it of no use to point out that language is also an irrevocable part of the cultural rather than the natural sphere. The study of biological imagery in women’s writing is helpful and important as long as we recognize the other factors involved in it. It is only through the ideas about body that women conceptualize their existence in society; but there is no expression of the body which is unmediated by linguistic, social and literary structures. The difference of woman’s literary practice, therefore, must be sought, as Miller says, in “the body of her writing and not the writing of her body”.\(^{61}\)

(iv) **Silence and the Dream of a Common Language**

Adrienne Rich is a poet with a mission. She does not write to win prizes but to change the laws of history. It is precisely this mission that sets her apart, for instead of choosing academic poetry, she hurled herself into the political arena. She wants women to train in history so that they can see what has been done to them and how they have been subordinated and denied their real powers. To start this, she questions the very existence of the social institutions like heterosexuality and motherhood. She believes that it is only through ignorance that women have been vulnerable to the projections of male fantasies as they appear in art, in literature, in the sciences, and in the media. Rich suggests “not anatomy, but enforced ignorance, has been a crucial key to our powerlessness”.\(^{62}\) So ultimately it is an ideological chain which has bound them to their place, “all science and all scholarship and all art are ideological: there is no neutrality in culture”.\(^{63}\) They are ideologies of male supremacy, constructions of male subjectivity.
Rich wants women to come forward to rip off the disguised mask of innocence and impartiality and reveal the political and ideological aspects of man-made institutions. It is not an easy task to undertake. They will have to train themselves properly and learn to read “the silences, the empty spaces, the language itself, with its excision of the female, the methods of discourse” which tell more than the context. Once they learn to watch for what is left out, to listen for the unspoken, to study the patterns of established science and scholarship with an outsider’s eye, they will be able to trace the ideological constructions.

Rich herself adopted the same strategy when she set out to write poetry. Her early poems seem to be of utter disappointment from a feminist perspective, as they seem to affirm the masculine thinking and way of expression. But, as a matter of fact, they present what Elaine Showalter calls “a double-voiced discourse containing a ‘dominant’ and a ‘muted’ story”. The dominant story, for most female writers, corresponds with mainstream patriarchal values where power is a male prerogative, while the muted story presents the “maternal precursors”, to use Showalter’s phrase.

Though Showalter applied this theory to women’s fictions, it can also be applied to poetry. The reader faces an “object/field problem”, while finding out the double-voiced discourse in literature by women, where the dominant story and the muted story pose different possibilities to interpret the text: Is it a vase that is seen or a face? Once the face becomes clear, you no longer regard the vase conventionally or vice versa. The “plots” of Rich’s early poems may present an orthodox “vase”, but the muted story comes forth as the real “face” of the poet. And it is in this muted story that Rich’s feminist vision lies.

Elizabeth Abel writes in her editorial note to Writing and Sexual Difference that “female characters and female authors alike emerge as
ingenious strategists who succeed in devising some mode of assertion”.

Women writers are “resilient” and make their assertions in resourceful ways. Adrienne Rich emerges as an “ingenious strategist”, with her womanhood in a male-dominated culture contributing to the double-voiced discourse in her early poems. Though she initiated the male writers and was appreciated by W.H. Auden for technical excellence, she invented “a mode of assertion” unnoticed by Auden. The subtlety of this assertion contributed to the eagerness with which Auden included her into the circle of men poets without paying it much attention to her being a woman.

Rich believes that this “modesty” and disguise are very important aspects of the strategy adopted by the female writer, as she cannot express herself explicitly in this patriarchal system. A mask is worn to gain approval or place which the woman cannot openly attain or demand for herself. That mask may be of language or tone, perhaps a gentle acceptance or modesty, and in fact restraint of actual feelings is another form of disguise. Whereas men have the freedom of expression, women have to withhold in order to survive. But this repression of feelings. Rich believes, is dangerously harmful as it turns against the self and impedes the natural growth of women’s faculties, and makes them envy men’s powerfulness. Rich writes:

Outside of the mother’s brief power over the child – subject to patriarchal interference – women have experienced power in two forms, both of them negative. The first is men’s power over us- whether physical, economic or institutional.... Like other dominated people, we have learned to manipulate and seduce, or to internalize men’s will and make it ours. and men have sometimes characterized this as “power” in us; but it is nothing more than the child’s or courtesan’s “power” to
wheedle and the dependent’s “power” to disguise her feelings – even from herself – in order to obtain favors or, literally to survive ... women have also felt man’s powerfulness in the root sense of the word (potere, posse, or pouvoir – to be able, to be capable) – expressed in the creations of his mind. Powerfulness is the expressive energy of an ego which unlike ours, was licensed to thrust itself outward upon the world.⁶⁸

When power is associated with maleness, force, or both, woman’s experience of it becomes negative, as she does not exist anywhere. Either she is the one the power is worked upon or else considered incapable of “expressive energy” because she is not male. Adrienne Rich’s early poems express these negative experiences of women, the results of which can be viewed in her double-voiced discourse. These are poems of their time and yet a criticism of their time with resonance of more complicated intentions.

Adrienne Rich’s female personas in certain important poems seem to accept the roles assigned to them but at the same time desire for more active expression: the ability to change sex roles and social structures that restrict woman’s freedom. This ambivalence is caused by equating power with virility and questioning the propriety of woman’s having such a masculine quality.

The poem “An Unsaid Word” beautifully presents woman’s negative experience of power. Marked by the themes of denial, escape, and disguise, it concerns a “good” woman who could get the attention of her man through her power to seduce him. She decides not to do this, thus the “unsaid word”.

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

Here, there is a double voice in the poem, where the dominant one prevails. A woman’s willing submission to sexual roles that permit a man to roam freely contrasts with a woman’s restricted movement as she stands still “where he left her”. In effect, the woman appears as the fulfillment of male fantasy, for she muffles her power and remains silent, her words of desire or complaint “unsaid”. Because this woman is modest and unassuming, she keeps her man.

The dominant voice is perceptible in the gracefulness of the style as well, which is formed in its scansion, its rhyme scheme, its syntax and diction. The poem is beautiful in its formal elegance. Its thought is articulated in a syntactically perfect, single sentence that scans its basic iambic tetrameter asserting itself most elegantly in lines 4 and 7. The fluidity of the syntax is enhanced by the rhyme scheme (ab ab aaa), which seems effortless, graceful, and unstrained. The speaker identifies with the persona and the friendly tone of this identification makes distinction between the speaker and the persona difficult to discern. Entering into the persona’s consciousness, the speaker knows what the woman could do but does not, what the woman desires but denies. She realizes how difficult it is to maintain the self-restraint required to keep the relationship intact with a man and she confers the credit she deserves.

The muted voice is discernible in the relationship between the title of the poem “An Unsaid Word” and the first phrase: “she who has the power”. For there it is a woman’s true power, not her negative experience of power,
lies in language. Instead of language using women, as the formal language of this poem uses Adrienne Rich, women must “begin to grasp [language as] a material resource that women have never before collectively attempted to repossess”. Those unsaid words are woman’s power: to draw back that power is “the hardest thing to learn”.

The feminist vision, though uncertain, comes forth in the amorphous last line that produces an unconscious irony. Why is “this the hardest thing to learn”? And what does this refer to in its poetic context? Presumably, it is for the man’s freedom that she rejects her desire for him. Her rejection of her own needs complicates the entire matter. This line can be interpreted the other way: it is difficult to learn the pretexts required to perform a woman’s role. Those pretexts restrict a woman’s activity, “stands where he left her”, while allowing the man his full freedom. In fact, his freedom appears predicated upon the restrictions imposed on the woman. She finds these restrictions incarcerating because she has to deny her most elemental feelings.

Rich’s ambiguity in the last line takes the entire poem in a different direction by presenting a comment on the prescribed sex roles that force a woman to such negative experiences as denial and disguise. Though Rich could not express openly her ideas, but the irony of the last line allows the muted voice to break through the graceful, orderly surface of the poem. Thus, Rich through her restrained style of writing, presents a clear picture of the woman’s negative experience of power. Further complicating the matter, she sees power as virility. Then, the ambivalence toward such power in her early poems is true to her vision that patriarchal controlling power is basically hostile to woman and to life on earth.

British social anthropologists, Edwin and Shirley Ardener in their theory of the “dominant and muted” groups presented an influential model
of how language works in a culture and how gender affects its workings, which helped feminists to understand the workings of language in society. This theory says that while every group in a society will create its own ideas about reality, not every group has equal access to the "mode of specification" – i.e. the linguistic system through which realities are publicly constructed. This is controlled by the dominant group. Relatively less powerful groups are "muted": their reality does not get represented. As Shirley Ardener explains:

[There are dominant modes of expression in any society which have been generated by the dominant structures within it. In any situation, only the dominant mode of the relevant group will be 'heard' or 'listened to'. The muted groups in any context, if they wish to communicate, must express themselves in terms of this model, rather than in ones which they might otherwise have generated independently.]

What Shirley Ardener wants to say is that muted groups have to perform a kind of translation: their reality differs from the dominant one, but cannot be expressed in its own terms. And as a result, she claims.

This dominant model may impede the free expression of alternative models of the world which subdominant groups may possess, and perhaps may inhabit the very generation of such models. Groups dominated in this sense find it necessary to structure the world through the model (or models) of the dominant group, transforming their own models as best they can in terms of the received ones.
The particular muted group to which the theory is applied in the Ardeners’ work is women. Women have a different reality, but they are forced to encode it in terms of men’s reality.

Muting should not be confused with actual silence. As Shirley Ardener comments, “They [the muted groups] may speak a great deal. The important issue is whether they are able to say all they would wish to say, where and when they wish to say it.” Nor is muting a condition in which a group has no distinctive view of reality to communicate. Edwin Ardener emphasises: “the muted structures are ‘there’, but cannot be ‘realized’ in the language of the dominant structure.” According to the Ardeners, then, women have their own model of the world, and they have the capacity to use language. The problem is that the two things do not fit together, whereas for men, the dominated group, language and reality map on to one another unproblematically.

The feminist linguist Cheris Kramarae expresses her idea that women are a muted group because they find it easier to understand men than men understand women because a muted group needs to understand the dominant model in order to “translate” its own into acceptable terms, whereas the reverse is not true. The notion that women will express more dissatisfaction than men with dominant modes of expression, and will search for alternatives as dominant modes does not fit properly with women’s reality. She also says that women will have difficulty with public speaking and that their sense of humour will be different from that of men.

Mary Jacobus in her article, “The Question of Language”, proposes that “women have access to language only by recourse to systems of representation which are masculine.” She does not dream of a distinct woman’s language but assumes woman’s mimicry of man’s language.
Within that mimicry, which she calls "an acting out or role playing within the text", the women writer has got some room that marks her distinctiveness as a writer. Mimicry of male models, says Jacobus, "allows the woman writer the better to know and hence to expose what it is she mimics". These theories of muted voices and mimicry can also be applied to the poetry of Adrienne Rich, particularly in her early work.

Adrienne Rich's mimicry of male models contains aberrations that Mary Jacobers would call "errors". Jacobus says that "Errors ... must creep in where there is a story to tell, especially a woman's story". In The Diamond Cutters, poems that deal with the gender related issues are testimonies to those fascinating "errors" that make Adrienne Rich less a fairy-tale princess and more a poet on her way toward finding a female aesthetic. Error, sin, and degeneration capture Rich's poetic consciousness as central metaphors in The Diamond Cutters, i.e., "Living in Sin" and "From the Land of Sinners". In "Lucifer in the Train", she addresses Satan directly as a prototype of all mortals, for "Once out of heaven, to an angel's eye/Where is the bush or cloud without a flaw?". The world of the Diamond Cutters is a "fallen world", as Albert Gelpi puts it, where even love is not pure, for "to love a human face was to discover / The Cracks of paint and varnish on the brow". To such a fallen, flawed, cracked, and error-ridden world, it becomes the artist's responsibility to be extremely careful. Rich's rejection of her male models through her less-than-perfect mimicry is not a mistake on her part but a conscious effort to disagree with a revered male authority when gender issues are in question. Two of her poems, "Autumn Equinox" and "The Perennial Answer", where the influence of Robert Frost is vividly clear, exemplify Rich's efforts to disagree.
“Autumn Equinox” offers a good opportunity to investigate the range of Frost's influence on Rich and the so called “errors” that happen to be there in her mimicry. As the poem makes use of Frostian blank verse and the long interior monologue, there are echoes of “After Apple Picking” in the starting of the poem, which establishes a New England setting and a persona who works outside during the change of the season:

The leaves that shifted overhead all summer
Are marked for earth now, and I bring the baskets
Still dark with clingings of another season
Up from the cellar.²

The earth’s season mimics the season of the old, retired couple in the poem, a Frostian commonplace. In contrast to “After Apple Picking” or “Mending Wall”, the worker is a woman, but Rich fixes upon different points of emphasis. Her persona, a woman beyond fifty, is married to a professor, having no children, a fact about which she is curiously silent. This silence dramatically contrasts with the eruptions in Frost’s “Home Burial”. The silence in Rich’s poem can have different meanings and open new vistas of understanding, and it is through this silence that the poem overturns the skillful Frost mimicry, raising questions about marriage, frustrated creativity, and the potential for change in men and women.

The poem opens up with a contrast where the woman is working outside and her husband, Lyman, is at home absorbed in a study of Dryden’s Satires. When it gets dark, it is the wife who “come indoors to light the lamps”.²³ She is surprised at her husband’s obsession with study – “that least acidulous of men”.²⁴ This idea makes her think of a possible reversal in their personalities. His obsession with satire reminds her of herself as she used to be:
While I. who also spent my youth and middle-age
In stubborness and railing, pass the time
Now, after fifty, raking in the sun
The leaves that sprinkle slowly on the grass.
And feel their gold like firelight at my back
In slow preoccupation with September. 

Apparently, there is a change in her personality, but unlike that of her husband it is for the better. She is full of life, motion and light, while he is inert — “eyes alone moving/Like a mended piece of old clock work”. 

While he seems to have become malignant, she appears in harmony with nature, the leaves she rakes — “their gold like firelight at my back”. Rich delineates the aging of her persona as a transformation: the dross of her life — the leaves she rakes — rendered golden and creating a halo around her. Her husband when she has left behind has shown no progress and has become less than the man he used to be. When he was working as a professor, she served as his attendant, having no career of her own. He never shared his ideas with her and in a way gave her reasons to take her life and squeeze it dry. But she emerges as a totally different personality who is in full command of herself. The possible reasons of these change are discussed as:

For Lyman

The world was all the distance he pursued
From home to lecture – room, and home again.

I bit my fingers, changed the parlor curtains
To ones the like of which were never seen
Along our grave and academic street.
Thus the woman rejects the convention while the husband becomes convention itself. The moon light fascinates her and draws her out in the open field to see the beauty of nature. She imagines that "the moon must shine on finer things. / I had not seen" and hates the pictures hanging in Lyman’s study room – "the crazy tower of Pisa", the "Pyramids", and "Cologne Cathedral".

I hated them
For priggishly enclosing in a room
The marvels of the world, as if declaring
Such was the right and fitting role of marvels.

If this could be seen as "typical neurotic Frost", as Randall Jarrell calls somewhere else, it also provides Adrienne Rich an opportunity to understand better and in a way to expose what she mimics. While Frost deals with woman’s silence in a general way, Rich deviates from her master and delves in the deeper recesses of the nature of silence. This woman hates her husband’s love to confine the "marvels", which for her is a confinement of life itself. She is ambivalent about her husband and her marriage, but remains silent and does not discuss it with him. She is calm and quiet, but her silence does not render her powerless in any sense. Instead it makes her an embodiment of life itself and a symbol of transformation. For Rich, transformation is "a process which will leave neither surfaces nor depths unchanged, which enters society at the most essential level of the subjugation of women and nature by men". She is of the view that every common woman is the embodiment of the extraordinary will – to survival, a life-force that transcends childbearing: unquenchable, chromosomatic reality. Only when they can count on this force in each other, everywhere, know perfectly that it is there for them, will they cease abandoning and being abandoned by “all our lovers”.

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Adrienne Rich considers the problem of speech, of language as the primary problem. She wants women to break the long-established silences, “liberating ourselves from our secrets”, and understand the terrible negative power of lie in the relationships between women. In fact, women have been forced to lie for survival. But to lie habitually, as a way of life, is to lose contact with the unconscious, and unconscious requires truth. It ceases to speak to those who want something else more than truth. Rich says that an honourable relationship, where the partners have the right to use the word love, is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other. Rich understands silences that come from woman’s conditioning, particularly when such silences preserve a relationship. In “Autumn Equinox” the wife recollects the memories of her newly married life after her experience of loathing for her husband’s pictures:

Night, and I wept aloud, half in my sleep.
Half feeling Lyman’s wonder as he leaned
Above to shake me. “Are you ill. unhappy?
Tell me what I can do”

“I’m sick. I guess-
I thought that life was different than it is”.
“Tell me what’s wrong. Why can’t you ever say?
I’m here you know”

Half shamed. I turned to see
The lines of grievous love upon his face.
The love that gropes and cannot understand.
“I must be crazy. Lyman – or a dream
Has made me babble things I never thought.
Go back to sleep – I won’t be so again”.  

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Her husband repeatedly asks her the reason of her weeping, but she remains silent about it. She knows that he loves her and this fact forces her to think that she "must be crazy". Is not his love enough? What else could she desire for? Vague and insubstantial, she suppresses her discontent and becomes silent. But this silence leaves many a complex question unresolved when a woman is faced to make difficult choices in a marriage that threaten to confine her and shrink her possibilities. But ultimately the wife gives in to her husband and their marriage endures. The silences in the poem are more telling. They indicate Rich's lapses from Frost's influence and set the poem as characteristic of her development not just as a writer who subverts her influences in order to establish her own poetic identity, but also as a feminist visionary who knows woman's silences from within and whose aim is to transform those silences.

Most of the work on women and silence written by women clearly show that silence is a problem for women, that they are, in some sense, both intimidated into silence and stifled by silences. Adrienne Rich writes in "Cartographies of Silence" that:

Silence can be a plan
rigorously executed
the blueprint to a life
It is a presence
it has a history a form
Do not confuse it
with my kind of absence"

But there is a very important distinction between silence as a consciously chosen strategy, as in the case of Adrienne Rich, and silence as
a restraint imposed upon one. Silence as a strategy can be instrumental in
gaining power and control over one’s life and the circumstances she lives
in. Trinh T. Minh-ha writes that “silence as a refusal to partake in the story
does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is a voice, a
mode of uttering and a response in its own right. Without other silences,
however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed; it is simply one voice less, or
more point given to the silencers”.

Adrienne Rich, by trying to break the silence through her wonderful
command over language, connects a woman with her real power and makes
her coming into “an existence finally my own”. She wants women to talk
about their “secret emptiness” and “frustrations” as it will enable them to
overcome the negative and destructive emotions which will harm them.
Rich, herself, in her early married life, felt the deadly effect of her choked,
suppressed emotions when she was unable to use her creative powers in the
right direction. For her the poems written during that period were “mere
exercises” and all the praises that came her way didn’t mean anything for
her as she felt disconnected from herself and alienated from the woman folk
which she is an inseparable part of. Artistic creation for her was like a
violation, a belated reaction to male penetration rather than something
possessing and controlling. Though these poems are more than “mere
exercises”, but her instinctive originality in these poems lies not in formal,
stylistic matters, but in her new insight into what it means to be a woman in
the kingdom of the fathers. This is actually what she was looking for and
when she joins these insights with her wonderful command on poetic craft,
she begins to find her own voice.

In this search of the voice of the self. Adrienne Rich sees language as
the necessity of life. Now the trees inside struggle to come out in the forest
which was empty all these nights and she is sure that it “will be full of trees
by morning”. It is impossible now to check the irresistible gush of emotions that will shatter down the structure holding her:

The leaves strain toward the glass
small twigs stiff with exertion
long-cramped boughs shuffling under the roof
like newly charged patients
half – dazed, moving
to the clinic doors.

It is necessary to give a definite form and shape to the rumblings to recognize the self, as it becomes visible only when we have the eyes to see it and it comes through language. So, for Rich, language is not simply a way of expression but the creative power that creates the self and our existence in the world. It is only through language that we exist as human beings. Thus for women language is the necessity of life if they want to realize their existence and utilize the power that this realization brings, as language and power are intrinsically related to each other and they in turn to women for their actualization.

By insisting upon language as the necessity of life Adrienne Rich’s movement enters into a new realm. Silence, which her personas in the first two books employ as a strategy to wield power, is also exercised by the personas in the fourth book to create more lively possibilities for themselves and others. The essence of this liveliness is the rebirth or revival that characterises transformation opposed to the power-to-control. this transforming power inheres in language that is right, useful, and life enhancing.

In her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision”, Adrienne Rich says that poetry is created out of the transformative power of
the writers, but for women writers the handling of this power poses several problems:

If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience, it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate: nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is renaming. Now, to be maternally with small children in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage, requires a holding-back, a putting-aside of that imaginative activity, and seems to demand instead a kind of conservatism. I want to make it clear that I am not saying that in order to write well, or think well, it is necessary to become unavailable to others, or to become a devouring ego. This has been the myth of the masculine artist and thinker: and I repeat, I do not accept it. But to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination. The word traditional is important here. There must be ways, and we will be finding out more and more about them, in which the energy of creation and the energy of relation can be united.

Thus Rich’s aesthetics (the energy of creation) mingle with the personal (the energy of relation), but language remains the hinge-point to the transforming power.
In “I am in Danger-Sir-″, a title taken from Emily Dickinson’s letter, these patterns of meanings reach to a culmination. She provides Adrienne Rich with a model of a woman who has “it out at last/on [her] own premises”. Language, for Dickinson was a necessity of life, as it is for Adrienne Rich. The poem presents an analysis of the relationship between language and the poet. Rich considers Dickinson’s withdrawal from the world as caused by an intense focus on language, as if she could not live with the “spoiled language”, as Higginson described Dickinson as “my partially cracked poetess at Amherst” and was forced to go back to a world created by the language of her poetry:

you, woman, masculine
in single-mindedness.
for whom the word was more
than a symptom –

a condition of being.
Till the air buzzing with spoiled language
sang in your ears
of Perjury.

and in your half-cracked way you chose
silence for entertainment.
chose to have it out at last
on your own premises.  

This poem beautifully sums up the main concerns Rich has in this volume. First, it presents language as a necessity of life: “a condition of being”. Second, it approves Rich’s criticism of words that misunderstand: “spoiled language / sang in your ears / of Perjury”. Third, it considers
silence as a viable choice given the conditions. Here Rich makes some tacit connections between woman, the poet and power. She realizes that Dickinson’s power as a poet emerged out of a desperate struggle for self-definition, in a way to fight for her right to use language in her own style. Rich’s own struggles as a poet clearly enter in this poem and she projects onto Dickinson her own concerns. This connection is most clearly reflected in the way they both “chose silence for entertainment”. Rich’s silence is expressed through the subversion of her male masters or the use of womanly silence as a motif in her poems. Identifying herself with Dickinson, Rich writes in her essay “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson” (1975). “The methods, the exclusions, of Emily Dickinson’s existence could not have been my own. Yet more and more, as a woman poet finding my own methods. I have come to understand her necessities. could have been witness in her defense”. Primary among those necessities was a language which was not “spoiled”. Thus, Rich undertakes the task of transforming her own silences, the unsaid words, into a powerful language as she finds this in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Diana Wakoski. She writes in *The Washington Post Book World* that “In both Plath and [Diana] Wakoski a subjective, personal rage blazes forth, never seen before in women’s poetry. If it is unnerving it is also cathartic, the blow torch of language cleansing the rust and ticky-tacky and veneer from an entire consciousness”.

In the final phase of the 60s. Rich’s mind was rapidly changing. There was a clear shift in her poetic consciousness from an attachment to the male principle to an identification with the female principle as the center of transforming power. This locating of female principle within herself leads Adrienne Rich to a liberation of the self where poetic power makes sense only if her personal transformation through her art extends outward
beyond the self to include the others. Now she perceives herself as an “instrument in the shape of a woman” who has the power to transform and can bring about “the relief of the body and reconstruction of the mind”.

Though she realizes “the fullness of her powers” and knows that she is “a woman sworn to lucidity”, at the same time she is aware of the fact that this lucidity is not so easy to come as the language she uses is not her own: “This is the oppressor's language” which has a deep-rooted sexism in it. In an article “Teaching Language in Open Admissions” Rich writes that language and literature have been used against the unprivileged men and women, to keep them in their place, to mystify, to bully, to make them feel powerless. She arrives at the conclusion that “language is power, and that, as Simone Weil says, ‘those who suffer from injustice most are the least able to articulate their suffering; and that the silent majority, if released into language, would not be content with a perpetuation of the conditions which have betrayed them. But this notion hangs on a special conception of what it means to be released into language: not simply learning the jargon of an elite, fitting unexceptionably into the status quo, but learning that language can be used as a means of changing reality’. Adrienne Rich’s aim is to assist the finding of language by those who did not have it and who have been used and abused to the extent that they lacked it. If language is the essential necessity of life, then the handling of language will make us more human: in full control of the situatedness of life.

Utterly dissatisfied with the “oppressive language” of the male world, Adrienne Rich craves for a new language that will enable her to establish a relationship with other women:

I am afraid
of the language in my head

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I am alone, alone with language
and without meaning
coming back to something written years ago:
our words misunderstand us
wanting a word that will shed itself like a tear
on to the page
leaving its stain

I need a language to hear myself with
to see myself in
a language like pigments released on the board

I want you to answer me
when I speak baldly
that I love you, that we are in danger
that she wants to have your child, that I want us to have mercy
on each other
that I want to take her hand
that I see you changing

and I want you to listen
when I speak baldly
not in poems but in tears
not my best but my worst
that these repetitions are beating their way
toward a way where we can no longer be together
where my body no longer will demonstrate outside your stockade
and wheeling through its blind tears will make for the open air
of another kind of action.
Rich dreams of a common language which can cut across the boundaries of separate words and things, and bring women together. The aim of Rich’s exploration is not the cultivation of “better women writers”, but of women who will begin to write outside the “law” of language, beyond the reach of male critical approval. Thus language itself in *Dream* seems to be in the act of changing its meaning within the framework of Rich’s ideological time. This changed sense of time appears to be her most radical statement so far. It not only attacks the prevailing aesthetic but attacks the *temporality* of that aesthetic. Our chronological sense of ourselves — and it is in this deliberately time warp that the Dream of a Common Language begins.

Rich wants us to dream collectively, suspend our waking sense of time’s authority, assuming all and nothing, as in a dream. As an expert explorer of the unconscious, she asks us to formally consider the dream as the single metaphoric device whose radar will guide us to “consciousness”. Again for Rich, the poet is a woman speaking to other women and her “dream of a common language” becomes symbolic of her wish to address that audience. Though, men are not excluded from this dream as Rich explains, “the point . . is not the ‘exclusion’ of men; it is that primary presence of women to ourselves and each other which is the crucible of a new language”. The poems are particularly written for women and about women.

Adrienne Rich’s concept of “dream of a common language” has been criticized by postmodern thinkers. North American scientist and philosopher Donna Haraway in her influential article “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” says in a straight-forward manner. “The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of a perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalising and imperialist one”. She is right that a great deal of feminist discussion about sex.
differences in language tries to combine women around a specific style, whether folk-linguistic or 'real'. Adrienne Rich is also looking for a common language for women that can express their shared experiences. She feels that the assumption of shared experience does not take into consideration the fact that gender divisions are unstable and there are many differences between women. In Julia Kristeva's terms, it allows too much to the 'metaphysical category women', and so falls into the patriarchal trap of failing to question the male/female dichotomy. It also gives way to a generalized view of all women as if they are all alike. The post modernists believe that this is a kind of imperialism that either ignores other women's realities or assimilates them to some version of its own.

Haraway thinks that the "dream of a common language" is a dream of totality and harmony, a nostalgic yearning for a lost tradition of social relations. She says that the latest developments in bio-technology and information-technology are enforcing new social relations for women all over the world. If on the one hand bio-technology is changing women's relation to reproduction and their bodies, on the other hand, information-technology is changing the world economy into a global economy of ultra-technologised production in which a workforce (primarily female) becomes scattered, segregated, deskillled. moved in and out of the labour market at will, and dealt more like machines than human beings.

These development show that human beings are now being considered as parts that can be slotted in or taken out in the service of a larger system. Haraway imagines a postmodern human being who is a combination of human and machine: "a kind of disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self".\textsuperscript{107} She adds: "This is the self that feminists must code".\textsuperscript{108} Though Haraway does not make any
direct statement but her remark that Cyborg is "the self that feminists must code" – seems to imply that it is of no use fighting new developments with old strategies. She considers it a futile effort to protest that we are but human beings and desire to go back to a more wholistic way of life. Even considering that such a way of life once existed, it cannot exist any more, you cannot turn the clock back on subjectivity. She suggests that we should use the potential offered by a Cyborg "personal and collective self".

When Haraway says that the problem is to "code" that self she means that the definition of a Cyborg is yet to be assigned. It will once again show the importance of language and meaning in constructing our ways of being in the world. Now it is for the feminists to code the new self.

Haraway, however, herself does not give any suggestion for codifying the new self and concludes her essay by saying, "this is a dream not of a common language but of a powerful, infidel heteroglossia". The word heteroglossia means "diverse/different tongues", while infidel means "without faith". So Haraway dreams of a diversity of voices, but all of them heretical, defying any loyalty to the traditional beliefs of their culture, thus, once again making women the outsiders, the speaker from the margins. It is not her emphasis on marginality, but her emphasis on diversity and plurality that makes Donna Haraway distinct from Luce Irigarary or Julia Kristeva. Her dream is of a "polyvocality" of language, a play of different voices in which no one will silence or drown out any other.

To conclude then, feminist postmodernism both carries and takes issue with the project of feminist semiology. Lacanians follow the complex constructions of masculine and feminine subjectivities in language, and dream of a world whose illusory constructions will be broken down. Postmodernists believe that we are living in such a world already, and we had better claim its potential before someone else defines it for us. The
Lacanians have the confidence that the “repressed” or “suppressed” feminine language will break through, restoring to women what they have been deprived of. They believe that “the feminine” itself is a myth, as Donna Haraway puts it. “Gender might not be global identity after all, even if it has profound historical breadth and depth”.110

What can be the possible language of a Cyborg like? Donna Haraway says, “Cyborg writing is about the power to survive not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other”.111 We can put it like that we should not dream for a new language or an old one forced away from us long back, but seize what is available and use it meaningfully to achieve our goals. She gives the example of the writing of the Chicana feminist Cherrie Moraga, who fabricates an oppositional identity by using a amalgamation of two existing languages. English and Spanish Haraway does not suggest, in any sense, a passive acceptance of the language of the oppressor, but a biting of the hand that feeds us. though it cannot mean looking for a language outside history, for a mythic unity contained in a shared, pristine word.

Postmodernist view, if scrutinized from close quarters, seems to have its own limitations and is far removed from reality. They criticise the concept of the universal ‘Woman’ as Utopian, and it is true to an extent as the content of gender division and the degree of gender inequality is greatly in variance over time and space. Needless to say, a woman working as a sweeper, a Hollywood actress and a woman of the royal, elite class would have few points of similarity in their experience of life. The relationship between a slave woman and the plantation owner’s wife in pre-Civil War America – to take an example discussed extensively by feminists - was hardly one of sisterhood and gender solidarity.
But does this really allow us to neglect gender as the basis for feminist analysis. In fact it can never be done as it challenges the very inception of theory itself which is based on a measure of abstraction. The similarities between women from different social set-ups are abstract rather than concrete. Basically the restrictions imposed on a woman irrespective of her social political, economic and cultural diversity and the resultant identity imposed on her are on account of being a woman and not a man. If making this observation is totalising and imperialist; then so is all theoretical discourse. any attempt of reaching beyond the simple bearing of witness to our own lives is termed as failure.

Now the postmodernist rejection of Adrienne Rich's "Dream of a Common Language" seems to be right as a perfectly true language, a perfectly faithful naming of experience is simply an impossibility. And as we know that no actual person actually speaks 'language', as language is an abstraction: in reality there are only languages, and it is impossible to overcome this rather fundamental division.

But this is a very literal adoption of a common language. Actually this should be taken as a metaphor. The basic idea and motivation behind this metaphor is not so much total unity as contact or communication – the desire of women to speak, to listen, to move as far as possible towards a basic understanding of oneself. In fact, the context in which Adrienne Rich creates this phrase "dream of a common language" is too often forgotten when the phrase itself is quoted:

No one lives in this room
without confronting the whiteness of the wall
behind the poems, planks of books,
photographs of dead heroines.
Without contemplating last and late
The true nature of poetry. The drive
to connect. The dream of a common language.¹¹²

The impulse behind this idea is not to deny difference and history, but to connect. In fact this is a rather modest impulse. It inevitably falls far short of the mystical, quasi-telepathic unity invoked in, for example, Suzette Haden Elgin's fantasy of Laadan, literally a perfectly faithful naming of women's experience. It is, however, an impulse that cannot be dismissed as totalising and imperialist. In fact, Adrienne Rich's desire behind this dream of a common language is not more than a way of speaking and writing that makes space for differing voices to speak, engage with one another and be respectfully acknowledged. As Rich beautifully says in one of her poems:

I long to create something
that cannot be used to keep us passive:
I want to write
a script about plumbing, how every pipe
is joined
to every other
the wash to pure water and sewage
side by side

or about the electrical system
a study of the sources of energy
till in the final shot
the whole screen goes dark
and the keepers of order are screaming¹¹³
It is this aspect of language that tends to escape the attention of semiologists, postmodernists, and many linguistic theorists. Feminists should not, as Rich believes, ignore it. Adrienne Rich strongly believes that women are not addressed in the same way as men. Women do not address others on the same terms as men. Patriarchal relations break in every act of communication. If we want to understand the role that language plays in women’s subordination, and what it can do for their liberation we need to attentively comprehend the questions of communication and address.

Clarifying her aim in using language, as to make it available to those who did not have it and to those who have been used and abused to such an extent that they lacked it. Adrienne Rich writes, in her article “Teaching Language in Open Admissions”, that we should use language “to provide tools and weapons for those who may live on into a new integration. Language is such a weapon, and what goes with language: reflection, criticism, renaming creation. The fact that our language itself is tainted by the quality of our society means that in teaching we need to be actively conscious of the kind of tool we want our students to have available, to understand how it has been used against them, and to do all we can to ensure that language will not some day be used by them to keep others silent and powerless”. Adrienne Rich is very democratic in her vision and wants to create a world where no one is an oppressed and neither is there an oppressor.
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3. ibid pp. 113-114.


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9. idem.


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22. ibid pp. xvi-xvii.

23. The Resisting Reader. p. xii.


27. Rebecca Hiscock. ‘Listening to her self’, as discussed in *The Feminist Critique of Language*, p. 4.


39. idem.


44. ibid. p. 39.

45. ibid. p. 158.


47. ibid. pp. 158, 161.


49. ibid. 175.

50. ibid. 175.


52. ibid. p. 248.

53. idem.

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56. idem.

58. ibid. p. 40.


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74. idem.
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78. ibid. p. 40.
79. ibid. p. 28.
83. ibid. p. 34.
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85. ibid. p. 34.
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87. ibid. p. 35.
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