Chapter 1

"When We Dead Awaken" : Re-Vision as a Concept

In 1971, The Commission on the Status of Women solicited four eminent feminists - Ellen Peck Killoh, Tillie Olsen, Elaine Reuben and Adrienne Rich, with Elaine Hedges as moderator to talk on “The Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century.” Adrienne Rich wrote her most declarative feminist essay “When We Dead Awaken : Writing as Re-Vision” for that forum, and it was published in an issue of College English (Oct. 1972) and later printed in American Poets (1976) edited by William Heyen. Adrienne Rich had borrowed the title of the essay from Henrik Ibsen’s controversial play When We Dead Awaken. In Rich’s own words, the play is "about the use that the male artist and thinker — in the process of creating culture as we know it — has made of women, in his life and in his work, and about a woman’s slow struggling awakening (italics mine) to the use to which her life has been put". (Rich, ARP 167).

The re-vision process is in fact this slow struggling awakening that the women’s consciousness is experiencing. There is a consciousness of being oppressed, subjugated and used in a male-dominated society. In a nutshell, this awareness helps women to make contact with that vital part of their own beings, which had been consciously as well as unconsciously suppressed over a long period of time. This kind of
contact, in turn, enables women to experience the basic emotions of anger and rage. The access to these raw, primitive states of being opens new frontiers for female writers, who have till now been preoccupied with themes like love and death. By the integration of the conscious and the unconscious, these writers weave a new tapestry of female writing, most commonly and appropriately called the 'feminist' mode of writing. The feminist school of thought thus springs from the roots of the re-visioning mode.

One significant fact that can't escape observation is that in the year Rich wrote this essay, she also took the bold step of walking out of a seemingly happy marriage. This step was actually an outcome of the pain and anger of a creative, thinking woman in a culture that had denied her the most essential aspects of her experience. During this time, Rich had passed through 'the phases of self analysis, individual assertion, and accomplishment to rejection of patriarchal values, feminist activism and finally to building a woman-centred community.' (Martin, AAT 168).

In 1951, Rich published her first volume of poems, *A Change of World*, widely appreciated and selected by W.H. Auden for the Yale Younger Poets series. The collection reveals Rich's great mastery over poetic technique and her overpowering linguistic finnesse. The poetic craft was the result of the influence of Eliot, Lowell, Pound, Stevens and Frost - the literary giants dominating the poetic scene at that time.
Rich got a Guggenheim Fellowship and travelled in Europe and England for a year. In 1953, she married Alfred H. Conrad, a professor of Economics at Harvard and thereafter lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. During this time she bore three children and published her next collection, *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems*, for which she received the Ridgely Torrence Memorial Award. Rich, however, was not satisfied with these poems 'which seemed to [her] mere exercises for the poems [she] hadn’t written' (Rich *ARP* 173). This dissatisfaction reached a high point culminating in a strong conflict, when she had to make a conscious choice between her conventional role as a woman and her role as a rebel poet. The resolution came in the form of her next volume entitled *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954-1962*, which won her the Hokin Prize of *Poetry*. *Snapshots* was an epiphanic work which forced her to recognize the problems of marginalization of women in a male-dominated world. Rich sought to trace the relationship between gender and social values and economic reality, which echoed the theory of marxist feminism. This analytical approach helped her to pinpoint the causes of the problem and also find ways and means to resolve it.

Rich pursued this explicit socio-economic analysis in *Necessities of Life: Poems, 1962-1965*, and *Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968*, and advocated a reintegration of the personal and the political to create a new order of civilization. *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970*, which received the Shelley Memorial Award, incidentally coincided with Rich’s decision to walk out of her marriage. As the title indicates, the poems reflect
Rich’s inclination to end the conventional phase of her life and begin with a new revolutionary one. The fragmentation and split dealt with in these poems, is in fact a part of the process of reconstruction – the reconstruction of a new social order to elevate women in society. The imagery and metaphors used by Rich are expressive of the split, as well as the rudiments of new life which emerge out of this split.

The ‘Re-vision’ process, which has become such a significant part of feminist literary criticism has its founder in Adrienne Rich. Rich’s autobiographical essay “When We Dead Awaken : Writing as Re-vision,” could be seen as one of the most candid analyses of a poet’s life and the process of growing and changing as related to her works. ‘Re-visioning,’ according to Rich was an attitude to be incorporated in the philosophy of every woman as it would help her to make contact with her own being. She elucidates the term in her essay:

Re-vision - 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 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 political order reassert itself with every new revolution (Rich, *ARP* 167).

The feminist critique thus involves a rejection of convention, a repudiation of orthodox beliefs, a questioning of norms and a re-visioning of the entire literary scene, heretofore dominated by males. The roots of feminism can thus be traced to the re-visioning mode as the latter seeks to unite all women in an international community irrespective of class, race, nationality or colour. In order to build a new identity, women have to liberate themselves from past taboos and bondages, which form a great part of the patriarchal (dis)order. In her essay, ‘The Anti-Feminist Woman’, Rich defines patriarchy as:

... any kind of group organisation in which males hold dominant power and determine what part females shall or shall not play and in which the capabilities assigned to women are relegated generally to the mystical and aesthetic and excluded from the practical and political realms (Rich, *ARP* 101).

Rich argues that the question is, then, not about the liberation of
women, or even the political organisation of men, but the collective loss and fragmentation suffered by human beings in the denial and suppression of the feminine. Rich’s next rudimentary work *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*, published in 1973, explores the basic life events - love, sex, marriage, motherhood - from a feminist perspective which developed as a result of the re-visioning process. Diving into the wreck is a metaphor for re-visioning that a woman undertakes in order to understand her inner self. As Helen Vendler writes:

... the forcefulness of *Diving into the Wreck* comes from the wish not to huddle wounded, but to explore the caverns, scars and depths of this wreckage. At first these explorations must reactivate all the old wounds, inflame the old scar tissue, awaken all the suppressed anger and inactivate the old language invented for dealing with the older self.

... (Vendler, *ARP* 170).

The aspect of language is very important for a writer because it constitutes the basic tool with which he/she is equipped: Language does not merely enable a poet in the aesthetic rendering of experience, but also in the bringing about of social change. Poetry happens when there is an integration of the conscious and the unconscious experience. In her conversation with Wendy Martin, Rich talks at length about this process:
A poem can't exist without form but it should be the result of a dynamic or dialogue between what is coming out of the unconscious and what is coming out of experience. This dialogue is expressed through the medium of language and everything that means - rhythm and sound and tone and repetition and the way words can ring off each other and clash against each other (Rich, *TCWM*).

As a radical feminist, Rich talks about a total transformation of the social fabric and the beliefs and customs that have helped to sustain and flourish it. In order to bring about this transformation, there is a need to look objectively at the cultural assumptions that have ruled and regulated the minds of the people inhabiting society as well as the linguistic generalizations that have sustained and strengthened these interrelationships. Wendy Martin talks about this shift in consciousness:

Such a shift in consciousness involves exploring repressed experiences, naming these perceptions, and incorporating them into daily life by creating new clusters of awareness, new patterns of meaning. Because consciousness responds to language, Rich has committed herself to writing a poetry that will be a catalyst for social change (Martin, *AAT* 169).

This kind of re-visioning will result in a reawakening of consciousness in women - an awareness of the hungers, self sacrifice, denials and frustrations that have become synonymous with being a woman. This
kind of 'psychic geography' as Rich calls it, is a rich thematic source for every woman writer. A whole new gamut of concerns, thus, emerges out of the re-visioning process – the bifurcation of society into active masculinity and dependent, passive femininity, man as oppressor hungering for more lands, more money, his reckless rape of the environment the overtones of which are apparent in the oppression of woman as the 'other' sex (Ecofeminism), the illusion of romantic love with man as the protector, the necessity of disengaging from a destructive patriarchal culture, the anger of women whose voice has been suppressed over millennia, the interrelationship of art and politics and the importance of creating artistic forms to embody women's actual experience.

On analysis, Rich digs out various strategies and institutions that have been used by men over the ages to relegate women to a lower position in society. Role divisions, monogamous marriage, unpaid domestic services of the wife, obedience to authority and punishment for disobedience, compulsory heterosexuality, the nuclear family, are some other major factors that have contributed to the degradation of women. These institutions have been further strengthened by legislation, religious precepts, media imagery and efforts at censorship. The education system too, to some extent, reinforces these inequitable patriarchal ideas and practices and any rebellion against convention is put down firmly or discouraged. Rich says:

Education gives us false messages - 'messages' telling you
that women have not really cared about power or learning or creative opportunities because of the psychological need to serve men and produce children . . . the messages telling you that women’s experience is neither normative, nor central to human experience (Rich, Blood 3).

Rich observes that parents are expected to subject the child to this kind of system of education which carries the child further in the “acculturation” process. This system dictates that women and men occupy two separate realms with no crossing over. While “woman is privacy, home, domesticity, emotional refuge, subjectivity,” man is “achievement aggression, outer world, economics etc”. (Rich, ARP 111). The parents reinforce the values of the school and discourage the child from rebelling against authority, be it the most corrupt, lest he/she should fail to enter the mainstream of society. The end product of such an educational system is a total conformist, who is afraid to question, much less change the dynamics of an established structure.

Another perennial myth afflicting the social ethos is the concept of the ‘token woman’ - the privileged, upper class woman who has the advantage of race, colour and education - and who forms only a fraction of the female population with advantages. However there is a catch here also, for the privileges that a token woman gets are in lieu of her substantiating the patriarchal structure. In her Re-vision essay Rich says:
We have liked to think of ourselves as special, and we have known that men would tolerate, even romanticize us a special, as long as our words and actions didn’t threaten their privilege of tolerating or rejecting us and our work according to their ideas of what a special woman ought to be. (Rich ARP&P 170).

A radical insight of the re-visioning process, and therefore, of the feminist movement, is to point out the destructive effects of the myth of a special woman. Another significant realisation is that the social structure can only be altered if the privileges extended to a few are extended to all unconditionally. That is to say ‘the personal is political’. This, then, becomes the essential slogan of the feminist movement.

Rich also analyses the way women have been portrayed and depicted in literature through the ages - as passive, diffident, timid, invariably threatened with a loss of beauty or the loss of youth (in hundreds of ‘carpe diem’ poems). Incidentally the image of women as depicted by men in literature has been an antithesis of what she is in reality - “an absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature . . . trying to put words together” (Rich, ARP&P 171). During the course of re-visioning, these old themes and representations are dispelled and new vistas opened to enable newer insights into the mind of the woman writer who no longer puts words and images together ‘under duress’, but endeavours to release her own thoughts and ideas into the mainstream of society.
Besides, the re-visioning process clearly helps in seeing the interpenetration of politics and art. Rich happened to live in a time of intense political activity – the Civil Rights movement, the Bay of Pigs incident, the Vietnam war – and this affected her psyche deeply. Poetry, she realised, could be used as an effective medium to explore all these political movements as an extension of male imperiatistic tendencies manifested in the hunger for more lands, more power, more resources. Such a perspective helped Rich to form connections between things as diverse as the Vietnam war and human sexuality.

The whole process of re-visioning then involves a number of phases namely –

(a) An analysis of the whole weight of a tradition that has regulated women and marginalised them.

(b) An experience of pain and betrayal.

(c) The pain leading to a lithe, constructive anger.

The emotion of anger, thus, becomes a positive and constructive force in the hands of the woman writer. It becomes a creative theme in the hands of the woman writer, who had till now been caught in ‘double bind’ – a supposed dichotomy between poetry and femininity. Instead of writing on the conventional themes of love and the concomitant suffering and elation the woman writer now makes anger the potential source of her poems. This gives her poetry new charge, new rhythm and new
meaning. Through the ages, women have not been permitted to experience and express the tremendous anger they have felt seething within their own selves. Rich suggests that women as a community have not had access to their full powers because their anger has been converted into self-hate and despondency. They have to learn to experience and explore this force and use it as the subject of their writing. Rich says:

...it is finally the woman's sense of herself - embattled, possessed - that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will and female energy... (Rich, ARP&P 168).

This anger permeating the feminine psyche has its sources in the environment and is built into society, culture, tradition and language. It is extremely necessary to go through the state of anger in order to dislodge old assumptions and structures. The expression of this anger in new forms of writing also provides an extraordinary sense of relief for the creative writer. Rich says:

A new generation of women poets is already working out of the psychic energy released when women begin to move out towards what the feminist philosopher Mary Daly has described as the "new space" on the boundaries of patriarchy. Women are speaking to and of women in these poems, out of a newly released courage to name, to love each other, to share risk and grief and celebration, (Rich, ARP&P 176).
The re-visioning process could be practically illustrated by looking at Adrienne Rich's life in retrospect. Step by step, phase by phase, we see her facing situations, resolving them to their culmination in her vision of a woman-centred community devoid of imperfections which are attributed solely to a man's world. Albert Gelpi and Barbara Gelpi write:

The most difficult, but at the same time, the most liberating aspect of this re-vision is that it involves the constant reassessment of the ways in which one has participated, whatever one's race, gender or class, in one's own oppression (ARP&P xii).

For about twenty years, Rich tried her best to please her father, who by his constant appreciation and criticism, made her feel special. In her early poem, 'Juvenalia', she writes:

Again I sit, under duress, hands washed,
at your inkstained oaken desk,

Unspeakable fairy tales ebb like blood through my head
as I dip the pen and for aunts, for admiring friends,
for you above all to read,
copy my praised and sedulous lines (SDL 32).

Rich's poetic style was clearly formed by the male poets she had
read as an undergraduate. In 1951, Rich's first volume of poems, *A Change of World*, was selected by W.H. Auden for the Yale Younger Poet series. The opening poem in *A Change of World*, 'Storm Warnings' sets the tone of the volume:

I draw the curtains as the sky goes black
And set a match to candles sheathed in glass
Against the keyhole draught, the insistent whine
Of weather through the unsealed aperture
This is our sole defense against the season:
These are the things that we have learned to do
Who live in troubled regions (CEP 3).

In a conversation with her Stanford colleague, Diane Milbrooke, Rich talks of this poem as an extremely 'self protective, self-indrawn poem'. The poem, penned in 1949, betrays extreme anxiety on the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the cold war and the revelation of death camps in Europe. The tight formal control of the lines is apparent in an elaborate pattern of consonance and slant rhyme. The last two lines, however, are indicative of the conflict that Rich was experiencing at that time - to adhere to a set form while exploring new themes. Commenting on the poem, Judith McDaniel says:

The form of the poem is a device, used exactly as the drawn curtains and hurricane lanterns as a "defence against the season : / These are the things that we have learned to do/ who lived in troubled regions"(McDaniel, ARP&P 310).
Rich was greatly praised by the critics who admired her ‘modesty’ and her commitment to poetic discipline. W.H. Auden, in his preface to *A Change of World*, greatly praised Rich’s “versification” and her “intuitive grasp of much subtler and more difficult matters like proportion, consistency of diction and tone.” Auden further remarked:

The poems . . . are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders, but are not cowed by them and do not tell fibs (*CW* 11).

The tough formal control and the dexterous poetic craft was also aptly illustrated in 'The Kursaal at Interlaken':

The air is bright with after-images
The lanterns and the twinkling glasses dwindle,
The waltzes and the croupiers’ voices crumble,
The evening folds like a kaleidoscope.
Against the splinters of a reeling landscape
This image still pursues us into time:
Jungfrau, the legendary virgin spire,
Consumes the mind with mingled snow and fire (*CW* 26)

The poems in *A Change of World* also illustrate the unconscious tensions and conflicts that Rich experienced as a young poet. In 'Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers', the tigers prance about fearlessly, while the aunt lies “ringed with ordeals she was mastered by” (*CEP* 4). Commenting on the poem Rich says:
... It was important to me that Aunt Jennifer was a person as distant from myself as possible – distanced by the formalism of the poem, by its objective, observant tone – even by putting the woman in a different generation (Rich, *ARP&P* 171).

Formalism, at that time, thus became strategy for handling themes she couldn’t otherwise dare to touch. The conscious craft of the poems was in fact a device to keep intense feelings at bay.

In the earlier poems, Rich also refrained from specifically focussing on her women, but concealed them in metaphors, for instance the metaphor of tapestry as in 'Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers' (*CEP* 4), the metaphor of the unchartered seas, as in 'Mathilde in Normandy':

When finger’s occupation and mind’s attention  
Grew too divergent, at the keen remembrance  
Of wooden ships putting out from a long beach,  
And the grey ocean dimming to a void,  
And the sick strained farewells, too sharp for speech (*CEP* 29).

or the metaphor of skies in 'For The Conjunction of Two Planets':

We smile at astrological hopes  
And leave the sky to expert men  
Who do not reckon horoscopes  
But painfully extend their ken
In mathematical debate
With slide and photographic plate (CEP 54)

The whole effort in these poems was to distance oneself from excessive emotion. 'At a Bach Concert' stated form as the ultimate gift that love could offer and admonished “too - compassionate” an art as “... half an art / Only such proud restraining purity/ Restores the else – betrayed, too-human heart” (CEP 30).

Rich refrained from making a personal statement in her early poems and believed that too great a compassion resulted in excessive sentimentality, which was to be shunned by a poet. A poet should learn to convey an emotion through exercising restraint. Later on, we see that Rich's essential transformation as an artist lay in learning to move away from the aesthetics of strict formal restraint to an expression of the personal. This personal mode which in turn laid the foundation for reaching out to the millions of her sex who shared her plight, thus became political. However, in some poems, as 'An Unsaid Word' Rich accepted, though reluctantly, the idea of separate spheres for men and woman:

She who has the 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 her own
Knows this the hardest thing to learn (CW 51).

Though the feminist theme was still in its incipience, the poem is written from the perspective of a woman who tries to conform to the demands of a traditional society and whose ability is measured in terms of her power to please and attract men. On the one hand, a woman must "sit like Patience on a monument", waiting for her man to come back. At the same time it is assumed that she has no right to mentally forage into an "estranged intensity" whence he might forbear to call her back. So we do feel dormant underpinnings of the rage, which was to fully ignite into a whole new feminist aesthetic in her later poetry.

As a young writer, Rich's work was recognized and she continued writing poetry. Though U.S.A. was strongly hit by the first wave of feminism in the early decades of the twentieth century, the 1950's remained a period of great domesticity. A lot of women relinquished active careers to raise their families. Looking back in retrospect Rich observes:

Life was extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of their marriage. I have a sense that women didn't talk to each other much in the fifties - not about their secret emptinesses, their frustrations (Rich, LSS 42).

Her first child was born in the year she came out with her second collection The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems. This volume too
won Rich accolades for her 'graceful' 'feminine' style and poetic decorum. Randall Jarell called her 'an enchanting poet' and 'a sort of princess in a fairy tale.' He observed that 'she lives nearer to perfection (italics mine) . . . than ordinary poets do'. (Jarell, 100-103). Poems like 'Love in the Museum' illustrate this perfection, both in theme and form:

But art requires a distance: Let me be
Always the connoisseur of your perfection
Stay where the spaces of the gallery
Flow calm between your pose and my inspection
Lest one imperfect gesture make demands
As troubling as the touch of human hands. (DC 89-90)

The carefully controlled rhyme scheme paradoxically reinforces the theme of turbulent emotions.

*The Diamond Cutters* (1955) reads like a travelogue, with poems written while Rich was in Europe on a Guggenheim scholarship, describing buildings and monuments with the keen eye of a tourist. The metaphor of the human beings as aliens in a fallen world almost becomes an anti-renaissance image in the volume. In 'The Tourist And the Town', Rich reflects:

The light has changed
Before we can make it ours. We have no choice:
We are only tourists under that blue sky, 
Reading the posters on the station wall. \textit{(CEP 71)}

and in 'Ideal Landscape' Rich laments:

\begin{quote}
of our lovers blundered
Now and again when most we sought perfection,
Or hid in cupboards when the heavens thundered
The human rose to haunt us everywhere,
Raw, flawed, and asking more than we could bear \textit{(CEP 69)}.
\end{quote}

as also in "Lucifer in the Train" where she pleads:

\begin{quote}
O foundered angel, first and loneliest
To turn this bitter sand beneath your hoe,
Teach us, the newly-landed, what you know;
After our weary transit, find us rest \textit{(CEP 75)}
\end{quote}

However, on careful persual, rather on 're-visioning', the collection does reveal some 'kitchensink poetry' which conveys the drudgery of the common household chores that take their toll on a woman:

\begin{quote}
Meanwhile he, with a yawn,
sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,
declared it out of tune
\end{quote}
while she, jeered by the minor demons,
pulled back the sheets and made the bed . . .

(CEP 94)

The violent force of the word 'declared' rings and clashes against the passive muteness of 'jeered' and makes the reader aware that Rich was already thinking of patriarchal institutions like marriage and role-division that have reduced women to mechanical clocks ticking monotonously to the call of men. Rich's own words make this evident:

I had a marriage and a child. If there were doubts, if there were periods of null depression or active despairing, these could only mean that I was ungrateful, insatiable, perhaps a monster (Rich, LSS 42).

The picture painted by Rich is depressive, decadent yet indicative of her later poetic concerns.

On re-visioning the first two volumes of Rich's poetry, we can make clear connections of her poetic themes and style with her vision as a woman poet. Her experiences as a woman finally prompted her to create poetry as a member of her sex in her next volume Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law. The acclaim she won for meeting the traditional poetic standards in her earlier poems, in fact gave Rich the courage to defy social and poetic conventions in her later works in an attempt to
be innovative and thus evolve an entirely new poetics of change. Rich attempted to learn the value of writing as a woman, to express her subjective self and to make her poetry ‘as a sounding board for the members of the female sex.’

It is interesting to note that Rich was greatly inspired by a painting of Dürrer’s *Melancholia*, which hung for years over her study desk and in which melancholy is depicted as a big, brooding woman seated among the instruments of intellectual prowess. In the conversation with Wendy Martin, Rich says “I created my own iconography and made her into an embodiment of the female artist, a thinker confronted with this intransigent culture’ (*TCWM*).

The metaphor of the poet as the diamond cutter and the poems as diamonds in the title poem, applies well to the rudimentary concerns in Rich’s earlier poetry, which were to be cut and chiselled into her later, maturer thematic concerns. The poetic supply was to be incessant and after one diamond had been cut and polished, “Africa/ (would) yield (her) more to do” (*CEP*, 139). As newer volumes poured forth, the earlier ones began to seem almost prophetic !.