Chapter 2

‘Implosions’ : Pain and Betrayal

“You all die at fifteen,” said Diderot, and turn part legend, part convention. Still, eyes inaccurately dream behind closed windows blankening with steam. Deliciously, all that we might have been, all that we were - fire, tears, wit, taste, martyred ambition - stirs like the memory of refused adultery the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years (Rich, SDL 24).

The French philosopher, Denis Diderot’s observation, quoted by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (123-24), was dexterously adapted by Adrienne Rich to underscore the attitude of patriarchy towards women. But she also juxtaposed this with the dream which every woman nurtures in her bosom – the dream of all she could have achieved, had her ambitions not been martyred at the altar of an oppressive patriarchal system.
After the publication of *The Diamond Cutters*, Rich did not publish another volume of poetry for eight years. During this time, Rich’s sons Paul and Jacob were born. As a mother of three young boys, she was left with little time to write poetry. Rich wrote “very little poetry, partly from fatigue, that female fatigue of *suppressed anger* (italics mine) and loss of contact with (her) own being; partly from the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores, errands, works that others constantly undo, small children’s needs”. (Rich, *LSS* 43)

Her husband, the Harvard economist Alfred Conrad, did not oppose her poetry writing, but clearly did not consider it as important as his own career. Rich says:

> My husband was a sensitive, affectionate man who wanted children and who – unusual in the professional, academic world of fifties – was willing to “help”. But it was clearly understood that this “help” was an act of generosity, that *his* work, *his* professional life, was the real work in the family . . . I understood that my struggles as a writer were a kind of luxury, a peculiarity of mine. (Rich, *OWB* 27).

At this point of her life, Rich experienced a painful conflict between the traditional feminine role of a wife and a mother and the subversive demands of her imagination. She tried her best to balance the two, doing a tightrope walk:

> About the time my third child was born, I felt that I had
either to consider myself a failed woman and a failed poet, or try to find some synthesis by which to understand what was happening to me. (Rich, LSS 42).

The anxiety and self-doubt, created by the conflict between her domestic responsibilities and her art gave way to guilt. During these years, Rich met the poet Denise Levertov and her husband. Denise’s friendship was extremely important to her because she was the first woman poet Rich knew, who also had a child. Denise helped her discover important poets like William Carlos Williams, the Black Mountain poets, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley. (TCDM). She also read the confessional poets - Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton.

The 1950s were a time of great political and social flux and hence of great anxiety. National and international events like the Civil Rights movement, the anti-war movement, the Cold war anxiety, the revelations of death camps in Europe, the Vietnam war, all raised important questions for the future. The grim social scenario coaxed Rich to think about the issues of pacifism, violence, poetry, society and her own relationship to all these things. Meanwhile, she continued reading voraciously, scribbling in fierce snatches in notebooks and writing poetry in fragments. An entry in her notebook describes her state of mind at that time:

Paralysed by the sense that there exists a mesh of relationships
e.g. between my anger at the children, my sensual life, pacifism, sex (I mean sex in its broadest significance, not merely sexual desire) - an interconnectedness which, if I could see it, make it valid, would give me back myself, make it possible to function lucidly and passionately. Yet I grope in and out among these dark webs. (Rich, LSS 44)

Rich had to virtually coax herself out of inertia and guilt to create more time for writing poetry. An entry in her diary a few months later says:

Necessity for a more unyielding discipline of my life. Recognize the uselessness of blind anger. Limit society (Rich, OWB 31).

In 1963, Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law was published and awarded the Hokin Prize of Poetry. For the first time in her life, Rich wrote as a member of her sex, thus repudiating the notion of ‘universal’ poetry, supposedly neutral in gender:

... yet I began to feel that my fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme, one which I would have been very unwilling to put on paper at an earlier time because I had been taught that poetry should be ‘universal’, which meant, of course, non-female. Until then, I had tried very much not to identity myself as a female poet. (Rich, LSS 44).
The *Snapshots* volume explored the anger and helplessness of a creative woman artist who is systematically devalued in a male-dominated culture in which the institutions of marriage and motherhood fetter an artistically accomplished woman to the yoke of patriarchy. The volume thus marked a first significant transition towards the feminist themes, which were to become a major preoccupation in Rich's later poetry. Rich's contemporaries, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton had also experienced conflict due to their opposing roles as women and female artists, but neither of them had the positive, analytical approach of Rich, which led her to analyse the socio-cultural causes of the conflict. Rich also began dating her poems from this volume onwards, as both a personal as well as a political act. Rich talks about this act:

I did this because I was finished with the idea of a poem as a single, incapsulated event, a work of art complete in itself; I knew my life was changing, my work was changing, and I needed to indicate to readers my sense of being engaged in a long, continuous process. It seems to me now as an oblique political statement – a rejection of the dominant critical idea that the poem's text should be read as separate from the poet's everyday life in the world. (Rich, *Blood* 180)

In addition to her earliest dated poems, the volume includes the first poems which have a loose structure – a form in which several fragments written at various points of time are juxtaposed and connected
together, a structure she was to employ in her later works.

The reception accorded to this volume was varied. Donald Hall asked Rich to reach for the "greater profundity and greater strength" of *The Diamond Cutters* (*Reading AR* 213). Although some of the critics found the book a good attempt, most contemporary reviews found it disappointing. Talking with Robin Morgan, who was greatly influenced by her work, Rich mentions the reception accorded to this book:

This book was ignored, was written off as being too bitter and personal... I was also conscious of male critics then, and it was like flunking a course. It was as if they were telling me, "You did well in book two, but you flunked book three". (Rich, *New Women* 107)

This volume, however, remains a major transitional work in Rich's life, initiating her into the realm of newer themes and forms. Rich tried to evolve an analytical approach to understand the socio-cultural causes of her guilt and despair. She also refers to women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir, who have greatly contributed to the feminist cause, thus foreshadowing the themes in her later works.

The title poem, 'Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law' is widely recognized as a breakthrough poem. It is a seminal poem as far as her themes are concerned. Craig Werner tabulates the themes as

"... the emptiness of women's experience in patriarchally
defined roles; the role of repression in enforcing patriarchal values; the relationship between this repression and the oppressive institutions relying directly or indirectly on force, particularly the threat of rape; and the need for an active response to both repression and oppression. . . .'(47)

The poem opens with the image of an aging Southern belle, her mind “moldering like wedding cake—heavy with useless experience, rich/ with suspicion, rumour, fantasy.” (SDL 22) The ceasura at “rich”, on the one hand identifies the belle with the poet, and on the other hand, explores the imaginative dimension denied by the phallic “knife edge/ of mere fact.” The Patriarchal society denigrates her experiences as illusions and this results in her alienation from her own self, ultimately resulting in withdrawal - the very same somnambulistic withdrawal imaged in 'Storm Warnings'. This is a withdrawal devoid of any thought or feeling, in which the woman is trapped in the “mere fact” of domestic rituals and establishes contact with her emotional self by transforming the culinary drudgery into a masochistic ritual:

Sometimes she’s let the tapstream scald her arm,

a match burn to her thumbnail (SDL 22).

The fact that she doesn’t experience any pain makes her believe that the voices she hears are angelic, thereby conveying the sense of a total alienation from her intellectual and emotional experience. Claire Keyes observes:
Rich seems hesitant in the poem to accept fully the angels’ Blakean proverbs: “Have no patience”, “Be insatiable” “Save yourself; others you cannot save. This is because she has yet not found the courage to break herself free from convention and the proverbs dictate a repudiation of all patriarchal traditions. (Reading AR 42)

The speaker has actually internalised the fear of being assertive in a society that scorns her aggressive or rebellious tendency. Rich picks up examples from history to prove that women have always been censured for independent thought and action - Queen Boadicea, who led an attack against the Romans in 62 AD, Mary Wollstoncraft, who asked for the rights to equal education for women; both were labelled “harpy, shrew and whore”.

Rich also analyses the reasons that have led to the oppression of women over the years - the major one being the tradition of economic and social dependency of women on men leading to emotional polarizations with men as providers and women as nurturers. Besides, society values a woman according to her power to please and attract men and not on account of her ability, talent or creativity. A woman must be “sweetly laughing : sweetly singing” to attract a man who is her provider:

Dulre ridens, dulce loqueris,
she shaves her legs until they gleam like petrified mammoth tusk. (SDL 23)
As Wendy Martin observes:

Here the speaker is aware of the cultural trap in which she is caught: the wife’s loss of legal autonomy in marriage; the diminishing power of the aging woman in a society that values youth, not wisdom. (Martin, *AAT* 181)

Rich also writes about the guilt and fear experienced by women who defy cultural norms:

A thinking woman sleeps with monsters

The beak that grips her, she becomes (*SDL* 22).

Anger, for Rich, is a great source of creative energy, if acted upon. However if this anger is denied/not acted upon, it is converted into madness or even suicide. Rich also makes an effort, in the same poem, to explode the patriarchal myths of marriage as an ideal institution and the idealized romantic image of self projected by patriarchal art. Rich talks of the dissociation experienced by women who try to conform to this image:

When to her lute Corinna sings

neither words nor music are her own. (*SDL* 23)

It is saddening to see so many women succumb to the hollow, glamourised temptations of patriarchy – a woman who “shaves her legs until they gleam/like petrified mammoth tusk”, Corinna, who adjusts the “silk against her knees”. This kind of living up to destructive romantic images implies a mute communal acceptance on the part of women...
rendering them “part legend part convention”. Identifying women with “nature”, this legend and convention declares “love” as “the only natural action” for women. Women who dare to rebel against these ‘legends’ and ‘conventions’ are held in contempt. The myth of romantic love is questioned by Rich as well as other women poets caught in this ‘double-bind’ which is a split between their imagination and their essential femininity. According to the dominant masculine tradition, the nature of lyric poetry is inherently incompatible with the essence of femaleness and a woman poet is a contradiction in terms. (Gilbert & Gubar Shakespeare’s Sisters 28). However the concept of a “triple bind”, postulated by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar can be more appropriately applied to this poem - if women are well educated, their scholarship is ignored or even mocked at and if not, they are regarded with disdain. Hence, both the positive and negative images of women alienate them from each other, and their positive creative potential is pervertly channelled in traditional ‘feminine’ bickering and backbiting:

The argument ad feminam, all the old knives that have rested in my back, I drive in yours, ma semblable, ma soeur! (SDL 22)

Rich thus moulds Charles Baudelaire’s satire on the ‘hypocrite reader’ to entreat women to denounce the self contempt that alienates them from each other.

However, the deep subconscious experience of pain and betrayal lies in a major threat to women’s psyche - the threat of rape. Though
Rich had not yet found the courage to suggest this threat boldly in the poem, the imaging in the poem clearly suggests the theme of rape in the poem. Here allusions to Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan' suggests the monstrous image of a male poet, who resorts to rape as a source of creative and cultural energy. The woman actually accepts the patriarchal myth because she becomes "the beak that grips her." In section 6 of the poem, Rich again refers to the birds of Byzantium when she addresses the woman as "you bird, you tragical machine".

The Re-visioning process makes Rich see how women have participated in their own subjection and victimization over the years. Rich’s reluctance to fully recognise the threat of rape in Yeats betrays the deeply ingrained fear and insecurity which every woman experiences-the risk of being denied the experiences (of love and culture) that make love bearable for her if she recognises the full extent of the physical and psychical rape. The violent tide of anger as a result of the recognition of self-denial threatens to immerse her and she is not yet ready for it. However the threat of rape is perceived and recognized and becomes an inseparable part of the women’s psyche. Craig Werner describes why repression seems preferable to expression in the poem:

'Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law' describes the situation in which even the aware woman may choose to repress her rebellious impulses - "our crime/only to cast too bold a shadow/ or smash the mold straight off/For that solitary
confinement/ "tear gas, attrition, shelling". Since both alternatives contribute to the intensity of the thinking woman's nightmare, repression may seem preferable to physical destruction or externally enforced isolation. (59)

In 'Snapshots of Daughter-in-Law,' Rich visualizes a woman in command of her body, with her erotic and creative energies celebrating life. This woman is not defined by her bodily functions (procreation) but the powers of her mind:

Well,
she's long about her coming, who must be more merciless to herself than history. Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge breasted and glancing through the currents, taking the light upon her at least as beautiful as any boy or helicopter, poised, still coming, her fine blades making the air wince but her cargo no promise then:
delivered palpable ours. (SDL 24-25)

Beginning with a hesitant questioning of patriarchal norms, Rich
emerges with a promise of fulfilment, echoing Simone de Beauvoir’s image of the soul as the helicopter-bird. Rich envisages a figure capable of channelising the destructive technological power used by patriarchy to demolish and dominate nature. Rich’s prophecy of this new heroine almost takes on epic proportions with her beautiful description of the transformation from a simple woman to a revolutionary.

Rich’s experiences as a young wife and mother actually form the basis for understanding the lives of a wide cross-section of women. This, in fact, was the beginning of the feminist cause which captured her thought and imagination in her later life. Rich tries to analyse the historical and cultural contexts of women’s lives, hoping to achieve a comprehensive view of the relationship between gender, social values and economic reality. Personal anger over the circumstances of her own life charged Rich’s poetic and social vision, which embodied the public and historical dimensions of female experience. Rich includes all women in her experience regardless of class, race or gender.

*Snapshots of a Daughter–in–Law* helped Rich to break free from the traditional taboos that had limited her range of creative expression, and this, in turn, led her to abandon the elaborate form and prosody of her earlier poetry:

Since I was more than a child
trying on a thousand faces
I have wanted one thing to know
Simply as I know my name
at any given moment, where I stand. (SDL 33)

Her poetry also acquired a visual quality which helped her in projecting and imprinting images so indelibly on the mind of the reader that they convey the message without an overt comment. The very fact that the words “eye” and “see” recur almost thirty times in this volume make her intention clear – to “outstare with truthfulness” every moment in its entirety. “The poetry is the camera with lens and focus, and the poems are snapshots” as Albert Gelpi observes (ARP&P 286). This capacity to see time helps humans to cultivate a consciousness without being mere victims of it. But the risks in the choice between safe security and a dangerous passage are apparent in 'Prospective Immigrants Please Note' :

Things look at you doubly

and you must look back

and let them happen. (CEP 188)

The poem is also indicative of a Jungian tendency of asserting one’s individuality after one has attained an initial set of goals, namely, – a career, marriage and family. Rich had written the poem in the year 1962, in her mid-thirties and the relationship between the poem and her life becomes very clear on careful analysis. Rich also shows how women have been acculturated into specific roles over the years, and how societal assumptions reinforce these roles, transforming them into essential customs. 'A Marriage in the Sixties' denigrades cliched conjugal devotion
and projects the snapshot of love, ripened and matured by thought:

Two strangers, thrust for life upon a rock
may have at last the perfect hour of talk
that language aches for; still -
two minds, two messages! (CEP 170)

A woman has always been trapped in a middle class, suburban lifestyle and Rich's revulsion comes off rather strongly in 'Antinous: The Diaries'. Rich adopts the persona of a man, a favourite of emperor Hadrian, commemorated for his sensual beauty. In the poem, Antinous becomes the inverted image of the object of male lust, and thus the symbol of a decadent society:

If what I spew on the tiles at last
helpless, disgraced, alone,
is in part what I've swallowed from glasses,
eyes,
motions of hands, opening and closing mouths,
isn't it also dead goblets of myself,
abortive, murdered, or never willed. (CEP 154)

'The Roofwalker', a poem dedicated to Denise Levertov, redefines a psychological and poetic perspective. In the fifties and the sixties, it was difficult for a woman to escape the fact that poet was a masculine noun. Rich also voices a similar concern when she says:

A life I didn't choose
chose me; even
my tools are the wrong ones
for what I have to do. (CEP 193)

In contrast to the life of meek submission she has chosen in deference to societal and cultural norms she now envisages a life of daring self-exposure. The wrong tools for a woman poet could either be a woman writing in a man’s voice and poetic form, or simply a formal poetic style that made writing difficult with children to care for. The pertinent question is, does the dangerous exertion of the roofwalker’s life compensate the passivity of his/her not having chosen it? Would she prefer a passive reading about experience to actually undergoing it?

I’m naked, ignorant
a naked man fleeing
across the roofs
who could with a shade of difference
be sitting in the lamplight
against the cream wallpaper
reading – not with indifference –
about a naked man
fleeing across the roofs. (CEP 193)

Rich explores new possibilities of self-realisation through questioning the ways in which a woman has always been defined and portrayed. She starts by identifying the masculine qualities within herself and expresses these through the images of men in several poems in the volume. For instance, the new woman evolving in 'Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law'
who is "at least as beautiful as any boy" or the good man, who is hard
to find and is "anarchic/as a mountain freshet/ and unprotected by the
protectors" (CEP 189) or the "larger than life" roofwalker who is also
a man.

'Ghost of a Chance' is a juxtaposition of a man’s discriminating
intellect with the inward suck of the female sea, undifferentiated and
undifferentiating:

You see a man
trying to think

You want to say
to everything:
Keep off! Give him room!
But you only watch,
terrified
the old consolations
will get him at last
like a fish
half-dead from flopping
and almost crawling
across the shingle,
almost breathing
the raw, agonizing
air
till a wave
pulls it back blind into the triumphant sea. \textit{(CEP 184)}

The rhythm of the middle lines betrays the strain to emerge into air while the monosyllabic last line precariously balances the long drag of the previous line, thereby, suggesting the satisfaction which comes out of the oblivion of the sea’s triumph. The masculine strength of all these characters is not as a result of their physical courage, but the force of their mind and will. The use of male persona is indicative of Rich’s constant striving to merge with her “animus”, the archetypal male principle and thus achieve an accommodation of opposites which leads to a balance in identity. Rich departs on an inner journey of exploration and discovery through her animus. In 'Face' she finds her reflection in the painting of a man whose “eye glows mockingly from the rainbow-coloured flesh”. But this mirror-image is himself “a fish, drawn up dripping hugely/from the sea of paint”. As Albert Gelpi suggests:

\begin{quote}
The metaphor, with the pun on “drawn”, establishes the connection between the artistic process and the interaction of consciousness and unconsciousness. The unconscious is a reservoir whose elements need to emerge into conscious comprehension and definition, and the artist must draw them up into the “glow” and “flash” of the light “out of blackness/ that is your true element”. \textit{(ARP&P 289)}
\end{quote}

But however active the animus might be, Rich clearly writes as a
woman. 'The Knight' enumerates the negative aspect of identifying with the animus – the cold, steely armour enclosing the flesh, nerves and even the eye:

Who will unhorse this rider and free him from between the walls of iron, the emblems crushing his chest with their weight?

(CEP 138).

This final stanza implies that in order to free himself from “walls of iron”, the knight must enter into a process which, as suggested in 'Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law', begins with the recognition and repudiation of traditional images.

Though Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law was seen as “being too bitter and personal” by critics, it remains the most epiphanic work of Rich’s life. However, the thought that led her to her next book Necessities of Life is best expressed in her own voice:

. . . something in me was saying, ‘If my material, my subject matter as a woman is going to be denied to me, then there is only one subject for me, and that is death’. That’s why Necessities of Life is a book about death. (New Woman 107)

Necessities of Life: Poems, 1962-1965 was published in 1966 and also nominated for the National Book Award. The poems in this volume chart Rich’s increasing participation in the public sphere, thereby,
corroborating the theme of the personal as political. Even at this time most of her critics (males with established academic credentials) viewed her works from the 'Audenesque' perspective. Robert Lowell’s review of this National Book Award nominee distinctly echoes Auden in the phrase “modesty without mumbling”. Nevertheless, Lowell saw Rich as engaged in a complex process of growth which had arrived at a “poised and intact completion” (5). John Ashbery, on the other hand, reviewing the same volume called Rich a “traditional poet . . . a kind of Emily Dickinson of the suburbs.” (Reading AR 217).

Diverging from her early formalism, Rich voices her concern that individual experience cannot be arbitrarily divorced from its social and historical context, and that the disharmony between the personal and the larger social forms is the reason for the bifurcation of mind and body, nature and civilization, the oppressor and the oppressed, masculine and feminine, which she sees as the basis of the patriarchal (dis) order. Through the 1960’s, Rich became increasingly aware of the impact of social and political events on her personal self. Recognizing an underlying root consistency behind this array of seemingly diverse problems, she arrived, at a definition of patriarchy which she defines in Of Woman Born as:

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

Rich goes on to make an extensive analysis of the patriarchal institutions and regulations which have evolved into cultural myths over a course of time. However, Rich also felt that concentrating on patriarchy - even repudiating it, would indirectly result in reinforcing patriarchal power. As a result, she shifted her emphasis to the struggle against "cultural solipsism" — a tendency to treat only the self or a group sharing specific characteristics with the self (gender, race, class, religion, nationality, colour) as real and to assign fixed roles for those marginalised and defined as "other". Such an analysis would ultimately lead to a rejection of the bourgeois images voiced in Snapshots and emphasize the necessity of reordering social values and structures.

The hallmark of Necessities of Life is, thus, a deepening subjectivity which does not signify withdrawal for Rich, but a more searching quest for people and social forces shaping their lives. The title poem is one of her first poems employing the first person pronoun to challenge formalist aesthetics. Tracing several stages in the development of a persona who gradually withdraws from familiar contexts into a potentially regenerative isolation, the poem provides voices corresponding to each stage of the persona's (and the poet's) growth. 'Necessities of Life' mirrors at least three distinct "vanishing acts" by the persona followed by a tentative rebirth. Even at the end of the poem, the "assertive self"
has not reemerged into the world after its prolonged hibernation.

The opening lines suggest that 'Necessities of Life', is unlikely to portray a completed process:

Piece by piece I seem
to re-enter the world: I first began

a small, fixed dot, still see
that old myself, a dark-blue thumb tack

pushed into the scene,
a hard little head protruding

from the pointillist’s buzz and bloom."

(CEP 205)

The lines imply that her previous position in the world has fragmented the poet’s persona, and the break on “seem” emphasizes that her perception is tentative. The poem is divided into four sections signalled by time shifts (“Now”, “Till”, “Soon”). After ruminating on the two stages of her past experiences, Rich analyses her present and anticipates her future course of action.

The first section presents the persona as a “small, fixed dot” in an impressionistic painting, someone’s else’s perception of reality — recollecting a period in Rich’s life when she unconsciously accepted
the others’ definition of self.

The balance is shaken when the “dot” proves incapable of fitting smoothly into the pattern. Finally, her sharpness and intellectual assertiveness clash with the harmonious picture and bring an end to this stage of the process, as Rich describes her first vanishing act:

After a time the dot

begins to ooze. Certain heats melt it.

Now I was hurriedly blurring into ranges of burnt red, burning green,

whole biographies swam up and swallowed me like Jonah.

Jonah! I was Wittgenstein Mary Wollstonecraft, the soul of Louis Jouvet, dead in a blown-up photograph. (CEP 205)
In this section, Rich describes her gradual generation of a viable alternative. Melting out of her old form, the persona experience a rush of unfamiliar sensation (manifested in repetition of internal-er sounds ("hurriedly", "blurring" "burnt" "burning"). In her confusion, the persona flickers into various shapes that the flux of experiences provides, assuming the personalities of Jonah, Wittgenstein, Mary Wollstonecraft. Here we have the second vanishing act of 'Necessities of Life', a conscious immersion in the cultural context, that helped Rich to reject the external definitions of the self and make contact with a vital part of her inner being:

Till, wolfed almost to shreds,
I learned to make myself

unappetizing. Scaly as a dry bulb
thrown into a cellar

I used myself, let nothing use me
like being on a private dole,

sometimes more like kneading bricks in Egypt

(CEP 205-206).

"Wolfed almost to shreds" by her previous experience, the persona withdraws into a metaphorical "cellar", indicating a conflict between the internal and the external self. In order to create her own self the
persona must make herself unappetizing to avoid being wolfed down where "whole biographies swam up and/swallowed me". The following section is the only one containing the title words "necessities" and "life":

What life was there, was mine,

now and again to lay
one hand on a warm brick

and touch the sun's ghost
with economical joy,

now and again to name
over the bare necessities (CEP 266)

No longer limiting her identity to an external form (painting, book, photograph), the persona finds relief in the process of brick-making, content in the knowledge that "What life was there, was mine". Kneading bricks in Egypt proves slavery to be a paradoxical source of freedom for her. Realizing the futility of abstract rebellion, Rich immerses herself in the concrete process of creating individual pieces for use in the construction of new premises. The phrase "to name/over the bare necessities" in fact indicates the major themes of the poem, the need to identify the essential elements of the self and the need to name the
minimal requirements for survival to facilitate the rebirth of a unified
self. However, Rich’s resurrection is in the shape of a cabbage, an eel,
something sturdy as well as slippery (something female and male at
once which the androgynous imagery suggests):

So much for those days. Soon
practice may make me middling perfect, I’ll
dare inhabit the world.
trenchant in motion as an eel, solid

as a cabbage head. I have invitations.
a curl of mist steams upward

from a field, visible as my breath. (CEP 206)

The lines mirror the physical and emotional fatigue of a deprived mother
after she has borne babies for a decade. And yet, what has she to look
forward to? Is it the company of garrulous crones?:

houses along a road stand waiting

like old women knitting, breathless
to tell their tales (CEP 206).

Seen from the perspective of Rich’s growing interest in a woman
centred transformative process, the poem suggests a metamorphosis
of the “tough little self”. Undergoing several transformations, the self
alternately contracts and expands swallowing "whole biographies" and shrinking down to a "dry bulb" in a cellar. The rhythm of the poem implies that the persona will again expand on re-entering the world. In fact in 'Necessities of Life', Rich focuses on "the conditions that will make re-entry into the world possible for women whose previous attempts to assert themselves in love and marriage failed", as Craig Werner says.

(23)

*Necessities of Life* has been interpreted by David Kalstone as an attempt to bring together "the energies of the solitary ego and the energies of the dialogue". Kalstone sees the title poem as a metaphorical enactment of "the rebirth of a tough little self" belonging to a young woman, who while listening to the "old wives" tales, "is clearly eager and gathering strength to tell her own" (154). Commenting on Rich's structural technique and her imagery in the volume, Helen Vendler says:

> We cannot help noticing how free from compulsion Rich's images have become. The early poems were so neat in their useful skeins of imagery; if a colour appeared in the upper left of the tapestry, it was sure to reappear, economically but predictably, in the lower right. Now precision of feeling and exactness of recollection govern the correlative. . . .

*(ARP&P 305)*

'The Trees', is an illustration of the mystery of relationship, between the internal and external world and the imagery employed to depict this
relationship is almost surrealistic. The rhythms of the poem trace a psychic movement, proceeding through a sequence of images from within to without. The psyche is seen as a house, in fact, a structure suggesting a plantation or a sanatorium filled with the natural shape of trees straining with a life of their own. While the conscious ego ("I") of the poem is unaware, the trees disentangle themselves and break out in the cover of darkness, "like newly discharged patients/half-dazed, moving to the clinic doors." (CEP 211) Although the exodus of the trees is presented as a cataclysmic event, the persona of the poem is unable to voice its reality:

I sit inside, doors open
to the veranda,
writing long letters
in which
I scarcely mention the departure. (CEP 211)

The failure of the poetic voice at this moment threatens to disrupt the poet's access to the sources of her power:

My head is full of whispers
which tomorrow will be silent. (CEP 211)

In fact, the poet's inability to recognise and give voice to her deeper emotions alienates her from her unconscious, with the result that her perception even of the moon (the emblem of womanly power) is coloured by modernist figures implying narcissism and fragmentation:

The moon is broken like a mirror,
its pieces flash now in the Crown
of the tallest oak. (CEP 211)

The poem is thus an eerie dreamscape for the reader to decipher her/himself.

We notice in this volume, light piercing darkness, in the imagery of several poems, indicating perhaps the poet’s increasing access to the deeper recesses and passions of her psyche which have hitherto remained unexplored and unexpressed. Even in 'The Trees', the moon, though fragmented, still illuminates the night.

The poem 'Focus' is a rare picture of things acquiring a metaphysical dimension as the “veridical light” falls on the poet’s desktop through a skylight:

- an empty coffee cup,
- a whetstone, a handkerchief, take on
- their sacramental clarity, fixed by the wand of light as the thinker thinks to fix them in the mind.

O secret in the core of the whetstone, in the five
pencils splayed out like figures of a hand!
The mind's passion is all for singling out.

Obscurity has another tale to tell. *(CEP 247)*

The sacrament is actually a flash of the mind, as it fixes, camera like, everyday things caught in this unusual light.

*Necessities of Life*, marks Rich's re-entry into a world, which is marred by scarred human relationships as poems like 'The Parting', 'Any Husband to Any Wife' and 'The Knot' indicate. In these poems, Rich also explores the relationship of masculine mythology with the specifically American manifestations of patriarchy. 'The Parting' pictures a man who feels free only when he stands on the headland. Condemned to a life of forced isolation, his wife is constantly stabbed by a relationship as "a knife/where two strands tangle to rust" *(CEP 222)*, recalling the "estranged intensity" of 'An Unsaid Word' where a man's mind "forages alone". Similarly, 'Face to Face' links the solitary figure on the beach with the Mosaic prophet and the Newtonian scientist, who circumscribe the world in an attempt to establish dominion - the typical tendency of a Puritan American male. Rich describes him as "circling (his) little all", claiming "to be law and Prophets / for all that lawlessness". *(CEP 248)*

'The Knot' *(CEP 248)* responds directly to William Carlos Williams' 'Queen-Anne's-Lace' and also to Robert Frost's 'Design' and culminates in the image of the eye seeing "through a mist of blood". Though Williams intended 'Queen-Anne's-Lace' to be a subtle analysis of the lover/
rapist's consciousness, 'The Knot', responds to the poem as a patriarchal attempt to distract attention from the reality of sexual violence. Rich's opening lines “In the heart of the queen anne’s lace, a knot of blood. / For years I never saw it”, may be read as a nature poem or a direct comment on Williams. Perceiving the flower’s whiteness as “A foaming meadow; the Milky Way”, she senses undertones of sexual violence in 'Queen-Ann’s-Lace':

there, all along, the tiny dark-red spider
sitting in the whiteness of the bridal web,
waiting to plunge his crimson knifepoint
into the white apparencies. (CEP 240)

Even at this early stage of her developing poetic aesthetic, Rich realized that recognizing the violence behind the aesthetic "apparencies" of the modern "masters" will inevitably unleash the anger necessary for the development of individual feminine integrity, "Little Wonder the eye, healing, sees / for a long time through a mist of BLOOD." (CEP 240)

While resisting the complex forces of patriarchy, Rich frequently re-visioned the work of her poetic predecessors particularly Emily Dickinson. Between her first reference to Dickinson in 'Snaphsots of a Daughter-in-Law' and her "third and last address to you" in 'The Spirit of Place' (CEP 43), Rich has tapped the Dickinsonian style beyond mere syntactical idiosyncrasies, as she describes in her brilliant essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson." (LSS 223-230), which gives a deep insight into the poet's mind. Realizing that Dickinson's work has been
available only "in garbled versions", and the poet herself has been "mothballed at Harvard", she sees the limitations of her own perspective of Dickinson in "Snapshots of a Daughter–in–Law". She takes Thomas Wentworth Higginson to test for labelling Dickinson as "half-cracked". Recalling the image of Dickinson as a housekeeper attending to several household chores, Rich re-emphasizes her intellectual prowess:

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  thought pulsed on behind
  a forehead battered paper-thin,
  you, woman, masculine
  in single-mindedness
  for whom the world was more
  than a symptom. (CEP 232)
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Ultimately Dickinson’s choice of “silence for entertainment” and her “half-cracked” withdrawal is seen as a response to the “buzzing (of) spoiled language” in her environment. Rich understands that the defensive strategy of Dickinson was employed against patriarchy and she respects Dickinson’s resolve “to have it out at last/ on (her) own premises”. (CEP 233)

'After Dark,' penned on Rich’s father’s death, also seeks inspiration from the Dickinsonian mode. It uses dashes to indicate the persona’s rhythm of perception. Feeling a sense of triumph at her new altered perception of things, the persona, however, is petrified by the thought that such an alteration entails destruction of the old order as she has known it:
Alive now, root to crown, I'd give
—oh,— something—not to know
our struggles now are ended.
I seem to hold you, cupped
in my hands, and disappearing.

When your memory fails -
no more to scourge my inconsistencies —
the sashcords of the world fly loose.
A window crashes
suddenly down. (CEP 227).

The poems in *Necessities of Life* are affirmations of a strong will to live in the extremity of our situation. 'Like This Together' concludes wonderfully with:

Dead winter doesn't die
it wears away, a piece of carrion
picked clean at last
rained away or burnt dry.
Our desiring does this,
make no mistake, I'm speaking
of fact: through mere indifference
we could prevent it.
Only our fierce attention
gets hyacinths out of those.
hard cerebral lumps, unwraps the wet buds down the whole length of a stem. (CEP 213)

The tension between “indifference” and “our fierce attention” heightens the determination to keep love alive by working at it.

As Albert Gelpi observes, several themes in *Necessities of Life* combine to highlight the dominant theme of a world shattered by patriarchal solipsism — “a world still marred by mutability (Autumn Sequence”, “Moth Hour”), still scarred by the violences of human relationship (“The Parting”, “Any Husband to Any Wife”, “Face to Face”) and by the abuse of the environment (“Open Air museum” “Breakfast at a Bowling Alley in Utica, N.Y.”), increasingly menaced by politics and war (“Spring Thunder”). . . , filled with elegies. (“After Dark”, “Mourning Picture”, “Not Like That”)” (ARP&P 292). In fact Rich’s central theme which is the attempt to unify personal and political experiences grows out of her attempt to realize the ideal of a female community capable of challenging the linguistic, institutional and mythological premises of patriarchy. The happenings in the world affect the happenings within the psyche, not directly, but as suffering transformed by imagination. Speaking of the connection between inner and outer, Rich says:

*We are attempting, in fact, to break down that fragmentation of inner and outer in every possible realm. The psyche and the world out there are being acted on and interacting intensely*
all the time. There is no such thing as the printer psyche, whether you’re a woman, or a man, for that matter. (ARP 114).

Though this opening up of self and the vulnerability it entails is often seen as a fault which men avoid and women are prey to, it is in fact a source of power according to Rich. Rich even says “the so called “weak ego boundaries” of women . . . might be a negative way of describing the fact that women have tremendous powers of interactive identification and sympathy with other people” (ARP 115) While in patriarchal cultures, transcendence has meant ‘rising above all’, in Rich’s feminist ethos, transcendence means reaching beyond oneself in sympathy with the plight of others. While male transcendence seeks to master, female transcendence acknowledges and interacts. And this is precisely what Rich seeks to achieve in her art and her actions.

In 1966, Rich was Phi Beta Kappa poet at Harvard and in the same year she and her husband moved to New York city. The next ten years were a period of hectic academic activity for Rich. From 1966 to 1999, she held appointments at Swarthmore College and Columbia University Graduate School, from 1968-1972, taught in the open admissions and SEEK programs at the city college of New York from 1968-1972 and taught at Brandeis University and later at Douglass College, Rutgers University from 1972-73. At this stage, Rich had also become increasingly active in her protest against the Vietnam war.

*Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968* is an extension of her earlier theme
of the interconnectedness of private and public life. Rejecting traditional male aesthetics which separates art and life, Rich asserts in 'Implosions' that poetry has the power to transform lives:

I want to choose words that even you
would have to be changed by (CEP, 318).

Recognizing the futility of apolitical aestheticism, she seeks a reintegration of the political and the personal in order to create new forms of civilisation. The poems reinforce the fact that politics is not abstracted and depersonalised, but tested on the nerve-ends (A Gelpi, ARP&P 293). Perhaps that is the reason the poems are permeated with anger, diffused nervous tension and unfocused hostility.

At this stage, the animus or the male principle is the crossover point, leading to a fuller comprehension and integration of the self. The male figure of the animus symbolizes the power of mind and will which are to be assimilated with the poet's feminine identity. In 'Orion', the first poem of Leaflets, Rich claims total possession of traditionally masculine capacities by projecting her identity on the masculine presence of the constellation Orion, first as her "genius" ("My cast-iron Viking, my helmed/lion-heart king in prison"); then as her "fierce half-brother", weighed down by his phallic sword and now as her mirror image and apotheosis. Her choice of the constellation as the focus of the poem suggests that both men and women have been rendered "half-legend" by patriarchal images. Though she repudiates images that deny her "masculine" potentialities, Rich grounds her vision in the acceptance
of female sexuality “I throw back my head and take you in”. However, this sexuality, being linked with her intellectual capacities, is nothing like the aesthetically pleasing rape imaged by Yeats in “Leda and the Swan,” but involves a tense and confrontatory relationship with another person. Taking Orion as an icon of the Euro-American patriarchal tradition, Rich dismisses the traditional phallic symbol, the “old-fashioned thing, a sword” that now “weighs you down”. The recognition of her own power is extremely painful and disorienting for Rich as it seeks to move her beyond the patriarchal grasp. When a man attempts to reach behind her eyes, he no longer finds his own reflection but a “starlike eye”, a symbol of the transcendent vision denied to women in traditional patriarchal imaging. She now adopts the phallic image of the “cold and egotistical spear”, but, nevertheless, redefines her new experience making sure the spear falls when “it can do least damage”. This new aspect of her personality, the energy and self-involvement out of which the poetry is written, will fight for its life:

Breathe deep! No hurt, no pardon
out here in the cold with you
you with your back to the wall. (CEP 283)

The ‘active principle’ of the poem is in fact Rich herself, and the words ‘cold and egotistical’ indicate qualities that will lead to creation and achievement as opposed to the tradition of selflessness and sacrifice associated with women. In her essay “When We Dead Awaken”, Rich talks about the several connotations of love:
The choice still seemed to be between "love" — womanly, maternal love, altruistic love - a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture, and egotism - a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of others, but justifiably so. For weren't they man, and wasn't that their destiny as womanly, selfless love was ours? (*ARP&P* 173)

Rich's sense of intelligence and verbal mastery as masculine qualities had strong autobiographical reinforcement, and expressed itself in a number of dialogues with her animus as the source of her identity and poetic power. Rich's note to the poem says that a few phrases from the poem echo Gottfried Benn's essay on the plight of the modern artist.

'The Demon Lover' (*CEP* 291–294), written nearly two years later, represents a more complex analysis of the psyche of a woman redefining her relationship with a patriarchal system. The poem echoes romantic writers - Byron, Poe and others and reflects the ambivalence of the persona's mode of thought. The poem "raises several questions—Does the title refer to the persona? Is the other figure male (the coexistent friend of stanza-seven or) female (the daughter/muse of stanza two)? Does the persona desire to leave a demonic patriarchy or does it desire to live within it?" (Werner, 45).

The poem begins with "Fatigue, regrets" and this fatigue stretches into a weariness as she reminisces over old stories and dreams of war, images of social forces affecting her experience. Aware of the futility
of language or touch, the persona again withdraws into a silence “Things take us hard, no questions”. However the rape imagery in the poem suggests Rich’s doubt of the withdrawal strategy:

If I give in it won’t
be like the girl the bull rode,
all Rubens flesh and happy moans.
But to be wrestled like a boy
with tongue, hips, knees, nerves, brain.
with language (CEP 291).

After presenting the image in which the persona’s “heart utters its great beats/in solitude”, she imagines a “new era” culminating in the first demonic image of a young girl replacing the weary woman who regarded the new era as an extension of her isolation.

The third stanza portrays the persona’s failure to touch or speak with an ambiguous companion during the North-eastern power blackout which is seen as a temporary disruption of patriarchal technology. In the eighth stanza the “hands and minds, which erotically waver” seem to suggest erotic energy. When the persona says “I’d like to be gay”, it seems like a Freudian slip — a veiled assertion of Rich’s suppressed sexual orientation. The words of the “gay song” remain ambiguous — “How could a gay song go’. Why that’s your secret, and it shall be mine”. The erotic, wavering hands intimate a disturbing truth — “In triste veritas?” — but the spell breaks off, leaving the persona to the patriarchal demons. She returns to her world where voices “press” her own and
where language seems futile. She now lies nervelessly and unquestioningly enduring a series of metaphorical rapes where she is "wrestled . . . with language", and is "take(n) hard" by "things." (CEP 292).

The persona’s return to a patriarchal context, however, is not a total withdrawal but a vow to articulate the secret knowledge she shares with her ambiguous companion. “I want our secrets — I will have them out”. Yet the inadequacy of the “necessary” language renders the persona’s desire to articulate the secrets futile and recasts her as a rapist rather than a victim. Owing to the presence of this patriarchal tendency in her emerging lesbian sensibility, the persona can neither actively advance nor passively withdraw. The schism and split between self and the other, language and experience, public appearance and repressed desire are manifestations of this dilemma. The final image ultimately resolves the experience in an image of “passive advance”. Recognizing the inevitability of the reality of withdrawal, the persona immerses herself “Seasick, I drop into the sea”. (CEP 294).

The cultural entombment of 'The Demon Lover' is reiterated in the imagery of several poems in Leaflets. In “5.30 A.M”, gory images of blood, fire and war repeatedly identify the poet with the red fox:

The fox, panting, fire eyed,
gone to earth in my chest.
How beautiful we are,
she and I, with our auburn
pelts, our trails of blood,
our miracle escapes, 
our whiplash panic flogging us on 
to new miracles! (CEP 304).

Rich expresses the certainty that she and the fox will die and the hunters, "inanely single-minded/will have our skins at last." 'Abnegation' also carries on this identification of the Woman-poet and the vixen. Comparing herself to "the red fox, the vixen", she denies any connection with the ascetic New England settlers with their "instinct mortified in a virgin forest", Rich wonders:

what does she want with the dreams of dead vixens, 
the apotheosis of Reynard, 
the literature of fox-hunting?

Only in her nerves the past sings, a thrill of self-preservation . . . and she springs towards her den every hair on her pelt alive with tidings of the immaculate present . . .

She has no archives no heirlooms, no future except death.

and I could be more her sister than theirs who chopped their way across these hills
The poem conveys the poet's idea very clearly and as Helen Vendler, suggests, it:

... jettisons every past except the residual animal instinct of self-preservation, and every future except death (GDKS, ARP&P, 308).

Thus in "Abnegation" the woman poet and the vixen share:

... no archives no heirlooms, no future/ except death (CEP 313).

"No future/except death" is the poet's distinct recognition of the aesthetics propounded by the confessional poets - Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Robert Lowell. The last two poems that Sylvia Plath wrote were 'Edge' and 'Words'. Rich's 'On Edges' (CEP 322) is probably inspired by these poems, as indicated by words like "dressing-gowns," "monster", "lampshade". Yet this is where Rich's identification with the confessional poets ends. Rich agrees that "the blades on the machine/could cut you to ribbons". The blades however, are not the dangerous helicopter blades from 'Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law' but the relentless keys of the poet's typewriter. And the "delicate hooks, scythe-curved intentions/ you and I handle" are actually words — and commas, the expression of hesitation. For Plath "Words dry and riderless" can endanger a poet's life. Rich, however, is willing to accept this danger and take the risk of becoming a renegade;
. . . I’d rather
taste blood, yours or mine, flowing
from a sudden slash, than cut all day
with blunt scissors on dotted lines
like the teacher told. *(CEP 322)*

Rich believes like Plath that “the blood jet is poetry” but what distinguishes her vision from Plath’s in her insistence that poetry/words have a function.

A major theme of Rich’s later poetry is to connect the problem of survival with the problem of communication. “Tell me what you are going through —”, the man asks in 'Leaflets' *(CEP 330)* “but the attention flickers” and he cannot hear her response, her plea — “Know that I exist!” The title of 'Leaflets' echoes Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass”. The central concerns of the poem are - "an attempt “to drive a tradition up against the wall”, the poet's identification with a power still perceived as masculine and her insistence on the present moment which would have become a part of history for the readers" *(Werner 167)*

The poem opens with an insomniac gazing out at “The big star, and that other/lonely on black glass/overgrown with frozen lesions” *(CEP 330)*. The ‘big star’ clearly refers to Whitman and suggests the importance of tradition. The history of the democratic vision is effectively captured in the last part of the first section:

the steamer edging in toward the penal colony
chained men dozing on deck
five forest fires lighting the island
lifelong that glare, waiting (CEP 331).

America — the brave new world, founded by convicts, shaped by the labour of slaves — transforms itself more frequently through wanton destruction than through prophetic vision. Invoking Whitman Rich writes:

I want this to reach you
who told me once that poetry is nothing sacred
– no more sacred that is
than other things in your life –
to answer yes, if life is uncorrupted
no better poetry is wanted. (CEP 333)

Thus. Rich reiterates the deep connection between poetry and life - a belief shared by the other “big star”, T.S. Eliot, although in a different form. The imagery of Eliot’s “The Wasteland” recurs repeatedly in parallel sections of “Leaflets” as suggested by Craig Werner (168-171) The five sections of “Leaflets“ can be interestingly compared to the parallel sections, of Eliot’s masterpiece. The staccato beats, fading voices in midsentences in the first section indicate frustrated desires, but there is hope of resurrection as in 'The Burial of the Dead', section of The Wasteland:
that I can live half a year
as I have never lived up to this time —
Chekhov coughing up blood almost daily
the steamer edging in toward the penal colony.

(CEP 331)

Here Chekhov and Kafka, who wrote of the metaphysical/political penal colony, assume the role of ritual gods. Rich’s “seasick neon/vision, this/division” clearly echoes Eliot’s concept of the dissociation of sensibility. While Eliot, wandering through “unreal cities” is caught in the aftermath of the Great War, Rich attempts to break away from the event:

the head clears of sweet smoke
and poison gas
life without caution
the only worth living. (CEP 330)

The second section of The Waste Land enumerates urban problems. Eliot envisions Cleopatra, reveals his wife’s complaints, confronts the apocalypse in the closing of a bar. In “Leaflets”, Rich writes of Telemachus while:

the bodies come whirling
coal-black, ash-white
out of torn windows
However, Rich attempts to transform the waste land through a mere act of will. “We’re fighting for a slash of recognition,/ a piercing to the pierced heart”. (CEP 332)

Like the androgynous form of Tiresias at the core of The Waste Land, Rich focuses on the ambiguous fire compounded of opposites – purification and punishment, passion and denial, Christianity and Buddhism. At the call of the “Dahomeyan devil”, the young girl in section III of “Leaflets” accepts the sacrificial role to effect the resurrection of “the young man”, “If, the girl whispers/ I do not go into the fire/I will not be able to live with my soul” (CEP 332). The girl thus becomes a kind of androgynous quester, assuming her identity with the young man of part II whose tears are “burning/as the tears of Telemachus/ burned”. The parallel to such a situation can be found in the Indian epic “Ramayana” in which Lord Rama’s wife Sita has to “enter the fire” to prove her guiltless identity and to absolve herself of the allegations levelled against her.

Unresurrected, like Eliot’s Phlebas and Phoenician, the girl drains even the killing ocean, anticipating the vision of dessication in the final section of Leaflets:

gray strayers still straying
dusty paths
the mad who live in the dried up moat
of the War Museum. (CEP 333)

Rich, too, shares Eliot's desire for regenerative rain; "I want to hand you this leaflet streaming with rain or tears". Both the poets prepare fragments to shore up against the ruins. However, while Eliot recapitulates the images of his poem and invokes the archetypal timeless past, Rich meditates on the negative impact of the Eliotic consciousness on the present:

If we needed fire to remind us
that all true images
were scooped out of the mud
where our bodies curse and flounder
then perhaps the fire is coming
to sponge away the scribes and time servers
and much that you would have loved will be lost as well
before you could handle it and know it
just as we almost miss each other
in the ill cloud of mistrust, who might have touched
hands quickly, shared food or given blood
for each other. (CEP 334)

Section (e) of 'Leaflets' resonates with the growing awareness of poverty. The old definitions of patriarchy, in spite of their inadequacy,
command her attention. "I'm too young to be your mother/you're too young to be my brother". Her perceptions remain fragmentary owing to her inability to conceive of alternative relationships in patriarchy. However her rebellion in 'Leaflets' remains incomplete due to the tension between her desire to repudiate patriarchy and her desire to assume "masculine" powers:

- life without caution
- the only worth living
- love for a man
- love for a woman
- love for the facts
- protectless. (CEP 330)

Rich asserted that the meaning of the leaflet derives greatly from the moment of its reading. In 1968, the poem drew inspiration and gave energy to Vietnam protests and racial rebellion. Its conclusion, however, remains valid even in the present situation: "I am thinking how we can use what we have/to invent what we need" (CEP 334).

Against the backdrop of the anti-Vietnam war movement and the rise of black nationalism in America, Rich also sought to articulate her sense of reality in modes that were different from the isolated single poem units that were largely prevalent at the time. It is at this point that her keen interest in the Ghazal as a form, especially as used by the Urdu poet Ghalib, (Mirza Asadullah Beg Khan, 1797-1869) was aroused.
In the late 1960s, Aijaz Ahmad solicited poetic versions of his literal translations of Ghalib’s ghazals from prominent American poets, including Rich, W.S. Merwin, William Stafford and Mark Strand. Rich approached the form with great interest and thus began her long romance with the Ghazal. Rich adapts the form in the 'Ghazals : Homage to Ghalib' section of Leaflets and in 'The Blue Ghazals' and 'Shooting Script' in The Will to Change.

The ghazals in Leaflets are Rich’s most successful experiments with the form and frequently emphasize the silences underlying discourse and the gap between expression and experience. The ghazal 8/4/68, addressed to Ahmad accepts contemporary deconstructive aesthetics when she states. 'If these are letters, they will have to be misread". (CEP, 353). The language of “Ghazals : Homage to Ghalib' reflects Rich’s severe disgust with the language and her desire to “see the world reformed”. Many of the ghazals are bitter addresses to men – especially the European representatives of tradition :

You are American, Whitman, and those works are yours (7/14/68 : i) (CEP, 341).

or

I hope you are rotting in hell, Montaigne, you bastard (7/16/68 : ü) (CEP, 344)
and again

what are you doing here at the edge of the death camps, Vivaldi?
” (7/23/68) (CEP 346).

While Rich’s earlier poems in Leaflets hardly question their own premises, the poems in this section draw attention to the issues of deconstruction and negation affecting their own composition. The first ghazal (7/12/68) transmits the paradoxical message that a message cannot be transmitted through language. Addressing a friend she writes:

When I look at that wall I shall think of you
and of what you did not paint there (CEP 339)

and thereby:

When you read these lines, think of me
and of what I have not written here. (CEP 339)

This linguistic incompetence is seen as a tool in the hands of an oppressive system which thrives on destroying communication:

The mail came every day, but letters were missing;
by this I knew things were not what they ought to be (7/16/68 : ü). (CEP 344).

Rich also invokes the Afro-American militants, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and Eldridge Cleaver, who ironically, drew well-founded attacks from both black and white feminists during the 1970s. More symbolic than actual, the two leaders represent potential presence on a landscape
Rich experiences in terms of absence; "we are ghosts/condemned to haunt the cities where you want to be at home" (CEP 350). Rich attempts to turn her nihilistic cluster of perceptions about things to practical use, rather than to dismiss their validity:

The friend I can trust is the one who will let me have my death.
The rest are actors who want me to stay and further the plots. (7/24/68 : ii) (CEP 351)

Rich uses the deconstructive quality of language to the "undoing" of connections on which traditional narrative depends and exploring the ghazal form, Rich juxtaposes these images in a seemingly random manner as in the ghazal dated 7/14/68: (i):

In Central Park we talked of our own cowardice
How many times a day, in this city, are those words spoken? (CEP 341)

or:

The tears of the universe aren't all stars, Danton;
some are satellites of brushed aluminium and stainless steel. (CEP 341).

Rich exhausts all attempts to construct a coherent unified plot from the ghazals. However her materials are already drawn from the political world and she lays stress on the concrete quality of experience. For Rich, freeing perception from the taboos of the received forms of
coherence is the first step towards establishing newer forms of relationships.

Although deconstructive strategies are employed in "Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib," the poem is not thoroughly committed to deconstruction. Rather, Rich applies the deconstructive insights into language to the issues of personal identity. Rich even emphasises the reconstituted self as the basis of reconstruction: "To resign yourself - what an act of betrayal!" (CEP 345)

In the last 'Ghazal' dedicated to her husband, Rich wishes for some magic incantation to protect them from suffering and she asks him speaking:

as a woman to a man

... How did we get caught up fighting this
forest fire,
we, who were only looking for a still place on
the woods. (CEP 355)

Even in the acknowledgement of all these limits, however language remains a human act which makes other actions and choices possible:

Our words are jammed in an electronic jungle;
sometimes, though, they rise and wheel croaking
above the treetops." (7/23/68) (CEP 346).

an idea which is reiterated:

I wanted to choose words that even you
would have to be changed by (CEP 318).
Rich’s effort to invent new linguistic strategies and forms and her rebellion against poetic convention can be clearly seen in one of her early poems in *Leaflets*. The long caesuras in 'Pincnic' reflect her effort to create a more open-ended style:

Sunday in Inwood Park

the picnic eaten

the chicken bones scattered

for the fox we’ll never see

the children playing in the caves

My death folded in my pocket

like a nylon raincoat

What kind of sunlight is it

that leaves the rocks so cold. (*CEP* 310).

The looser line structure suggests a willingness to disturb the pattern of her perceptions, to forego control to achieve another kind of a perception. Sun, the major masculine image in the poem is depicted as sterile, without life giving potency.

'Nightbreak' is an angry probe into the whole experience of political intrusion. Rich achieves the insight to connect political violence, the violence her own nation inflicts upon helpless children elsewhere in the world to the violence she experiences as a woman acquainted with the pain of motherhood. This helps her to make connections between Vietnam, napalmed every moment, and the lover’s bed:
In the bed the pieces fly together
and the rifts fill or else
my body is a list of wounds
symmetrically placed
a village
blown open by planes
that did not finish the job. (*CEP* 326)

The poem was written at the peak of war, when the horror had crossed all limits and the poet was cracking up. In the last stanza, night itself seems to shatter to pieces as also bits of the shattered self, that at dawn “move/dumbly back/toward each other”. The image of the earthen vessel (clay lamps) is in fact linked to the creative powers of women:

*Time is quiet doesn’t break things*  
or even wound *Things are in danger*  
from people *the frail clay lamps*  
of Mesopotamia  
row on row under glass  
in the ethnological section  
little hollows of dried up oil  
The refugees

with their identical tales of escape *I don’t*  
collect what I can’t use, *I need*  
what can be broken. (*CEP* 326).
Talking about the analogy of woman’s body and clay vessels, Rich writes:

... the pot, vessel, urn, pitcher, was not an ornament or a casual container; it made possible the longterm storage of oils and grains, the transforming of raw food into cooked; it was also sometimes used to store the bones or ashes of the dead. (OWB 97-98).

Thus the earthen vessel is not a passive receptacle, but a transformative entity. The poem can, then, be seen as a breakup of self as also of the self’s poetic capacity under circumstances seen as real.

Here her style also becomes increasingly experimental. The spaces between the words are as significant as the words themselves and signify a groping for understanding – a struggle to find language that will express her growing conviction of the interconnectedness of life and poetry.

Thus, we see how Necessities of Life (1966) and Leaflets (1969) accelerated Rich’s passage from the personal to the realm of the political. Rich’s political and aesthetic challenge to a prevalent tradition assumed primary significance in these books, forcing critics to reconsider their basic assumptions with regard to her relationship to tradition. Denis Donoghue highlighted the “apocalyptic” formal and thematic elements of “Leaflets”, while Mona Van Duyn’s Poetry review of the same volume was the first discussion of Rich’s work specifically in the context of
women's poetry (Reading AR 220). Rich wilfully maintains a distance from the highly theoretical "French" feminist discourse employing a technical, philosophic vocabulary accessible primarily to elite academicians. She, instead, chooses to adopt an anti-elitist "American" stance so that even when she is trying to deconstruct the dominant patriarchal discourse, she attempts to communicate in a "common language", recalling at times the "willed naivety" (Werner 12) of the highly intellectual anti-intellectuals, Whitman and Faulkner. Rich's "anti-French" stance ironically parallels the French "anti-theorist" Michel Foucault, who repudiates "globalising discourses with their hierarchy and all their privileges of a theoretical avant garde". (82). As the interrelationship of her major thematic, stylistic and tactical concerns suggests, Rich attempts to include all aspects of her experience in her vision of an actual alternative to patriarchy.

Rich's next book, The Will to Change followed in quick succession to the earlier ones and was awarded the Shelley Memorial Award of the Poetry Society of America. Rich's fascination with contemporary politics ranging from Godard's cinema to the Civil Rights movements, was sure to excite and ignite passions totally incompatible with the dispassionate modernism so highly praised by Auden in her earlier work. Talking about this surge towards a new liberation, Rich writes:

"Breaking the mental barrier that separated private from public life felt in itself like an enormous surge towards liberation."
For a woman thus engaged, every aspect of her life was on the lines. We began naming and acting on issues we had been told were trivial, unworthy of mention: rape by husbands or lovers; the boss's hand groping the employee's breast; the woman beaten in her home with no place to go; the woman sterilized when she sought an abortion; the lesbian penalized for her private life by loss of her child, her lease, her job. We pointed out that women's unpaid work in the home is central to every economy, capitalist or socialist. And in the crossover between personal and political, we were also pushing at the limits of experience reflected in literature, certainly in poetry. (Rich, *Blood* 181-82).

Thus, we see that as Rich writes more prolifically, the public and private spheres cease to have opposite meanings, rather they complement each other. The "implosions" her whole self experiences as she makes these vital connections are in fact the birth pangs of a new consciousness, a new perspective in which as she writes:

Gauche as we are, it seems we have to play our part. (*CEP* 291)