Chapter 4
‘From a Survivor’ : Feminism – A New Vision

The only real love I have ever felt was for children and other women. Everything else was lust, pity self hatred, pity, lust

This is a woman’s confession. (Rich, DW 30)

In the volumes from Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law through Necessities of Life, Leaflets and The Will to Change to Diving into the Wreck, Adrienne Rich has committed herself to the ideal of a woman-centered community and has challenged traditional roles that subordinate women to men. She has evolved a new social vision that is woman centered and emphasizes the interconnectedness of all forms of life. Her personal and poetic vision illuminates possibilities for new human and communal relationships. Feminism, then, remains central to her ideology:

I am a feminist because I feel endangered, psychically and physically, by this society and because I believe that women’s movement is saying we have come to an edge in history when men - insofar as they are embodiments of the patriarchal idea - have become dangerous to children and other living beings, themselves included; and that we can no longer afford to keep the female principle enclosed within the confines
of the tight, little post-industrialist family, or within any male-induced notion of where the female principle is valid and where it is not. (*LSS* 83)

Adrienne Rich regards feminism as the appropriate alternative to the question posed by Virginia Woolf – “Where in short is it leading, this procession of the sons of educated men?” (*Three Guineas* (63)). Feminism is the remedial therapy for the distortions of patriarchal ideologies which are the creation of male subjectivity; they are neither objective, nor value-free, nor inclusively “human”. (*LSS* 207)

Rich’s poetry has also evolved tremendously from the perception of a woman dependent on men for her social and sexual identity and financial support to the discoveries and difficulties encountered by a woman in the process of becoming autonomous and self-directing. While her poetry charts the course of her passage from the “unconscious into the sayable, into the actable” (Martin, *AAT* 169), her prose outlines the conscious understanding of her process. Alicia Ostriker links the recurrent occurrence of the word “change” in Rich’s titles with her growth as a poet-artist: “It is a joy, reading through a woman’s work, to watch her grow too large for herself, shed her skin and emerge new” (102). However Cary Nelson criticizes Rich precisely due to the uncompromising commitment to re-vision which Ostriker praises:

The personal pressure she feels – ‘to be more merciless to herself than history’ – makes it difficult to read much of
her poetry except for what it tells us, in retrospect, about her previous work, and what it shows her aching to become. (150)

With the articulation of her political vision in uncompromising feminist terms in *Diving into the Wreck*, Rich established herself as a major voice in women’s movements. While Margaret Atwood accorded great praise to the book, Rosemary Tonks condemned the volume as “abstraction or politics”, a stance which was to recur frequently in the criticism of Rich’s later work. (*Reading AR* 233)

Whereas Rich’s earlier poems in the 1970s advanced an “androgynous” or “humanist” vision of feminism, her later volumes, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981*, reflect Rich’s public advocacy of a lesbian separatist position. Academic reviewers such as Helen Vendler found Rich’s feminism overly didactic while feminist critics like Olga Broumas concentrated on applying her insights directly to the problems affecting the lesbian community. *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems* includes the autobiographic booklet *Sources* (1983), and the new poems included in *The Fact of a Doorframe* and suggests that Rich had subjected her separatism to extensive reconsideration. Thus, as Rich revised her approach to lesbian feminism during the mid 1980s, she moved nearer to the cultural mainstream. New collections have followed in quick succession, and the process of re-visioning continues. In *Time’s Power: Poems, 1985–1988* and *An Atlas of the Difficult World. Poems 1988–1991*,
Rich has continued to alternate her sights between her personal life and the larger social issues she has espoused— a bifocal vision identifying a deep and integral sensibility. Some poems explore her past, while other pieces arise from current events. The two latest additions to her increasing oeuvre have been *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991-1995* and *Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995-1998*.

Rich’s journey through greater and greater degrees of personal and political awareness has thus generated a whole body of criticism. In the *New York Review of Books* Rosemary Tonks writes:

> In . . . Rich’s work, the moral proportions are valid, the protagonists are sane, responsible persons, the themes are moving on their courses. Why is it then that we are still waiting for the poetry?

She then goes on to give the answer...

> . . . She has taken on too much, and the imagination is exhausted by the effort to familiarize oneself with all the burdens of the modern world. (*Contemporary Authors* 395).

Perhaps, somewhere along the line, Rich steps out of the formal, terse territory of poetry to the dangerous path of polemics but her poetry never degenerates into propaganda. Instead she projects poetry as a force within social life, a force that celebrates a woman’s capacity to integrate subjectivity and objectivity, the personal and the political, self-reflexive meditation and actual speech. But she comes to terms with the excesses of her programmatic work and makes that awareness
an index of the values one can create as a political poet. Truly, some of her ideas are little more than slogans and others are sometimes unnecessarily confined to female objects, but Rich uses poetry as an innovative exercise in adapting artistic skill to the process of defining one’s identity. Instead of treating her ideas as abstract generalizations about the world, they should be seen as instruments to make “the woman in the poem and the woman writing the poem the same person”.

The rage that charges much of Rich’s poetry in *Diving into the Wreck* still persists in her later works, but in a much more aggressive and radical form. It leads her to denigrate men and consider them beyond redemption. While in poems like 'Diving into the Wreck' and 'The Stranger' she focuses on the ideal of androgyny, in her later works she repudiates this ideal and emerges as a radical lesbian poet. She concludes that men are not even ready to accommodate this new kind of being, the androgyne, that she is forging in her poems, because, “His mind is too simple. I cannot go on/ sharing his nightmares”. (*DW* 51)

Rich concedes that there cannot be a merging of the female with the male if the male does not recognize the value of the woman. At this stage, we can anticipate Rich’s subsequent disclaimer of androgyny in *The Dream of a Common Language*, where in 'Natural Resources' she writes:

There are words I cannot choose again

*humanism*  
*androgyny*
Such words have no shame in them, no diffidence before the raging stoic grandmothers. *(FD 262)*

So we see, that her rage, no longer cathartic in these volumes, forces her to abandon the humanist vision and propels her to focus on women and the development of a female aesthetics as a means of redemption for “the kingdom of the fathers”. Rich’s feminism, sometimes leads her to dogmatism and a denigration of half the species, but this should merely be seen as a disjunction in her sensibility which keeps evolving. Rich sometimes lapses into stereotypes, unfairly branding all men as adulterers, rapists and murderers and her polemical pitch overwhelms the more characteristic aesthetic poise of her earlier poems.

Though Rich’s energizing sojourn into feminist territory began with *Diving into the Wreck*, her radical insights as a feminist writer come with her later volumes. Following her *Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1974*, Rich published a comprehensive prose study, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, a study which examines the themes of nurture and socialization at its most fundamental. Combining autobiography and extensive research, Rich attempts to provide a historical context for the significant distinction indicated in her title, by showing how the concept of motherhood is (mis) shaped in a society dominated by “the power of the fathers.” Rich examines the mythic and anthropological prehistory of motherhood in Western culture, the modern domination of the birth process by male physicians (‘Alienated Labour’) the psychological roots of “matrophobia” and the nature of the mother-daughter bond.
Rich also argues that the current controversies on abortion, contraception, methods of delivery and gynecological surgical procedures indicate that women are still not allowed to take decisions on their sexual and procreative life – processes. The medical control of women’s bodies, then, becomes a metaphor for the domination of women in other social areas.

'Sibling Mysteries' is a tour de force that uses the relationship between two sisters to elucidate the themes of chthonic mysteries (relating to the underworld/earthen deities), the primordial origins of the family, the denial of female power and the longing to return to the mother. Rich sees the bond between the two sisters and between the daughters and their mother as a primary social relationship:

the daughters were to begin with
brides of the mother

then brides of each other
under a different law. (DCL 52)

The beautiful relationship celebrated in Rich’s poem finds a parallel in Dickinson’s description of the bond with her sister Lavinia as “early, earnest, insoluble” and her observation that “without (Lavinia) life were fear, and Paradise a cowardice, except for her inciting voice” (L 3).

*Of Woman Born* has been criticized for exhibiting a radical
feminist bias and intemperate style, but several of Rich's observations are very penetrating, among them the contentions that birth is "neither a disease nor a surgical operation", that women should be allowed to choose how they will give birth and that men "need a kind of compensatory education in the things about which their education as males has left them illiterate". (*OWB* 242)

As the seventies progressed, Rich became a popular speaker at feminist forums even while remaining highly productive as a writer. Confronting the complex questions of race, class and gender, she came to terms with her own sexuality with the publication of *Twenty-One Love Poems* in 1976 which were tender celebrations of her lesbian relationship. These love lyrics were included in *The Dream of a Common Language* and as the name suggests, the collection presents a more hopeful vision of community among women. The collection is divided into three sections, each with a different focus. The poems in the first group, 'Power' are concerned with the outstanding achievements of individual women, the second group, 'Twenty One Love Poems' is a lyrical testimony to lesbian love and the third group 'Not Somewhere else, But Here' explores natural, social and personal history to cite its implications on contemporary women's lives.

'Origins and History of Consciousness', composed over a two-year period from 1972 to 1974, projects the image of a modern woman no longer bound by narrow social definitions free from "the hunter/ the trapper/ the wardens of the mind". Insisting on the need for communication,
she declares:

No one sleeps in this room without
the dream of a common language. \(DCL \, 8\) 

In the title poem of the first section, 'Power' (1974), Rich articulates the paradox that though Marie Curie was a brilliant and innovative artist, the very nature of her work deprived her of life:

She died a famous woman denying her wounds denying her wounds came from the same source as her power. \(DCL \, 3\)

This implosion of female energy is in contrast with the joyful explosion in 'Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev', Shatayev, being the leader of the women's team that climbed Russia's Lenin Peak in August 1974. Though Shatayev and her dream died in their effort, they were aware of the risks of their undertaking:

We stream into the unfinished the unbegun the possible. \(DCL \, 5\)

In 'Hunger', a poem dedicated to Audre Lorde, the collective commitment of the female community has replaced the absolute anger of one woman in 'The Phenomenology of Anger':

of what it could be to take and use our love,
hose it on a city, on a world,
to wield and guide its spray, destroying
poisons, parasites, rats, viruses —
like the terrible mother we long and dread to
be. (DCL 13)

The second part entitled 'Twenty-One-Love poems' has poems in a colloquial, conversational style. The poems reflect Rich's resolve to reveal her erotic relationship with another woman and reiterate that private attachment must exist in the context of a wider public life. However, she did not indulge in the illusion that such a relationship would eliminate the need for struggle in daily life:

If I could let you know

two women together is a work
nothing in civilization has made simple
two people together is a work
heroic in its ordinariness (DCL 35).

For Rich, lesbian love is a paradigm of female sexuality, neither defined by men, nor exploited by a phallocentric political system. In her essay published in 1980, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', Rich questions the cultural definition of a lesbian as deviant or perverse. Rich observes that institutionalized heterosexuality:

... strips women of their autonomy, dignity and sexual
potential, including the potential of loving and being loved by women in mutuality and integrity. (641)

Rich maintains that sexual slavery exists whenever women can’t choose the mode of their sexual behaviour and vociferously demands the freedom of sexual choice.

The third section of the volume 'Not Somewhere Else, But Here' has poems written from 1974 to 1977. The need for female collectivity and for the power of women is explored in this section. The central metaphor of 'Natural Resources' is that of a miner who explores the crevices of her mind and is engaged in a psychological excavation. Rich distrusts men and warns against a male “passivity we mistake in the desperation of our search – for gentleness”. She calls upon the active nurturing power in women “To help the world deliver” and declares:

I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,

with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world (DCL 67).

'Transcendental Etude' is the vision of a woman whose energies are balanced between the self and the world around her. Such a woman has the “negative capability” that would find herself:

becoming now the sherd of broken glass
slicing light in a corner, dangerous
to flesh, now the plentiful, soft leaf
that wrapped round the throbbing finger, soothes
the wound
and now the stone foundation, rockshelf further
forming underneath everything that grows.

(DCL 77).

It is she who protects by becoming, she who re-creates by combining
into the form of art, the foundations of life, a life not of argument or
jargon, but a life so open to experience that it provides the foundations
of a new home to a new world.

However, at this stage, the poet is still concerned with the problem
of communication. She remarks in 'Cartographies of Silence', "It is an
old theme even for me : / Language cannot do everything." Rich calls
the poem "political" since it breaks silences that smother identity.

Responding to Diane Middlebrooke’s observation that “many people
consider politics to be deadly to poetry” Rich clarifies that though such
an attitude is greatly prevalent in the United States, few other cultures
endorse it. She argues :

... the notion that politics - defined as the struggle to
grasp who we are in the world and what our place is in the
world and how we’ve been empowered and disempowered
and how we can transform the disempowerment – why should
poetry, why should any art be asked to stand outside that
great human enterprise? (TCDM)

In 1979, Rich published *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose* 1966-1978, which provides a detailed commentary on her evolving aesthetics, personal life and political engagement during this period. This collection of essays is an extensive exploration of the feminist concerns that inform her poetry. In her essay “Conditions for Work” (1978), Rich explores the meaning of feminism:

Feminism begins but cannot end with the discovery by an individual of her self-consciousness as a woman. It is not, finally, even the recognition for her reasons for anger, or the decision to change her life, go back to school, leave a marriage (though in any individual life such decisions can be momentous and require great courage). Feminism means finally that we renounce our obedience to the fathers and recognize the world they have described is not the whole world. . . . Feminism implies that we recognize fully the inadequacy for us, the distortion, of male created ideologies, and that we proceed to think, and act, out of that recognition. (LSS 207)

*A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981*, Rich’s next collection continues to celebrate the accomplishments of women in order to create positive female images. Women emerge larger than life for their ability to endure difficulties and excel in spite of adverse
circumstances. 'The Images' contrasts the violent and pornographic images of Manhattan street life with the lost forms of ancient civilizations – the Cycladic and Minoan cultures. According to Rich, a misogynistic culture condones and even encourages the exploitation and rape of women in contrast with the ancient civilizations that celebrate female sexual and emotional power. Invoking the Mother Goddess, Rich says:

When I saw her face, she of the several faces
Staring, indrawn, in judgment, laughing
for joy
her serpents twisting, her arms raised
her breasts gazing
when I looked into her world
I wished to cry loose my soul
into her, to become
free of language at last (WP 5).

Rich uses the metaphor of rape to portray the ill effects of a patriarchal language which has produced a world torn by opposition, conflict and pollution. She then urges women to find appropriate syntax, images and metaphors to create a unifying vision that emphasizes their organic interconnection to the deepest forms of life.

The title of this volume, *A Wild Patience has taken me This Far*, comes from the first line of 'Integrity' and the poem is prefaced with Webster's definition of the word, "The quality or state of being complete,
unbroken condition; wholeness, entirety”. Paralleling her earlier exploration of the emotional and cultural origins in 'Diving into the Wreck,' the poet undertakes a solitary journey to achieve wholeness, but here she is impelled by a steadfastness, a ‘wild patience’ instead of her anger. The fear and uncertainty that plagued the woman in 'Diving into the Wreck', becomes the calm strength of a woman, who comprehends the diversity of her experience:

Anger and tenderness : my selves
And now I understand they breathe in me
as angels, not polarities
Anger and tenderness : the spider’s genius
to spin and weave in the same action
from her own body, anywhere –
even from a broken web. (WP 9)

The image of the spider stands for the totality of response as against emotional polarization and this is the totality that the poet seeks to achieve as a feminist.

'Culture and Anarchy' (WP 15) takes its title from Mathew Arnold’s collection of essays published in London in 1869 and reiterates the pledge to be “nourished not bound” by ideas. The poem juxtaposes past and present to provide a comprehensive portrait of female friendship, female community and female vision. Excerpts from the diaries, letters, memoirs, essays and speeches of the suffragists Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Ida Huston Harper and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.
are set in iambic pentameter with no breaks, indicating the vigour of the vision of these women.

Friendships between several women is at the core of the poem which emphasizes the importance of women’s love and support for each other not only as a personal factor but as a major social and literary influence. A ready illustration is the bond between Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Elizabeth Barrett and Miss Mitford, Emily and Charlotte Bronte, Adrienne Rich and Michelle Cliff. Rich even incorporates one of the sections of a letter from Elizabeth Stanton to Susan B. Anthony:

I should miss you more than any other living being from this earth . . .
Yes, our work is one, we are at one in aim and sympathy and we should be together . . . (WP 15).

Rich contrasts the shared love and work of these women with patriarchal controls ranging from social exclusion to rape.

'The Spirit of Place' (WP 43) is a poetic homage to the New England countryside where Anne Bradstreet and Emily Dickinson compared their poems. Rich acknowledges her affinity with Dickinson and addresses her:

This place is large enough for both of us the river fog will do for privacy
this is my third and last address to you

With the hands of a daughter I would cover you
from all intrusion even my own
saying rest to your ghost

with the hands of a sister I would leave your hands
open or closed as they prefer to lie
and ask no more of who or why or wherefore

With the hands of a mother I would close the door
on the rooms you've left behind
and silently pick my fallen work. (WP 43)

Though painfully confined to the roles thrust on her by a patriarchal society, Rich finds redemption in her bonding with another female presence.

In 'Turning they Wheel' an eight-part poem that concludes the volume, Rich rejects the romantic exaltation in freedom from daily concerns and creates the vision of a liberty that emphasizes the importance of choosing to sustain life on a daily basis:

So long as you want her faceless, without smell or voice, so long as she does not squat to urinate, or scratch herself, so long
as she does not snore beneath her blanket
or grimace as she grasps the stone-cold
grinding stone at dawn
so long as she does not have her own peculiar
face, slightly wall-eyed or with a streak
of topaz lightning in the blackness
of one eye, so long as she does not limp
so long as you try to simplify her meaning
so long as she simply symbolizes power
she is kept helpless and conventional (WP 56).

The portrait thus reiterates all those realistic details that the romantic
tradition denigrades.

In 1982 Rich completed 'Sources', a twenty-three part autobiographical
poem composed in a variety of styles from short lyrical stanzas and
conversations to staccato dialogue and long prose paragraphs. The
poem is projected as a process of self-birthing:

Everything that has ever
helped me has come through what already
lay stored in me. Old thing, diffused, unnamed
lie strong
across my heart. (ARP&P 102)

The "sources" are in fact the sources of the poet's identity that "already/
lay stored in me". The issues of power, authority, concrete versus theoretical
rendering of experience, again surface in the work. While acknowledging
the influence of New England’s culture on her life and work, for the first time Rich explores the influence of her Jewish heritage, a troublesome question for her:

*From where does your strength come you Southern Jew*

*split at the root, raised into castle of air?*

(ARP&P 3)

Split at the root between a father, Jewish in name but not in faith and a nominally Christian mother, alienated from both Southern and New England values, Rich ponders over the question of her identity in an ever widening historical gyre – the oppression of women by men, of the poor by the privileged, of Indians by the Yankees, of blacks by the whites, of the Jews by the Nazis. Though Rich’s father greatly respected the Jewish intellectual tradition, he was alienated from his ethnic roots in order to be a part of the dominant culture. Meditating on her early relationship with her father Rich sees paternal authority which she had identified in ‘When We Dead Awaken’ as a form of patriarchal oppression. With the discerning eye of a feminist, Rich realizes:

I saw myself, the eldest daughter raised as a son, taught to study but not to pray, taught to hold reading and writing sacred: the eldest daughter in the house with no son, she who must overthrow the father, take what he taught her and use it against him. (ARP&P 104)

Rich challenges her Jewish husband’s defensive reduction of his
culture to a matter of “food and humour” as well. Though Rich’s father emerges as a stern and an exacting disciplinarian, Rich tries to dig beneath the surface:

I saw the power and arrogance of the male as your true watermark; did not see beneath it the suffering of the Jew, the alien stamp you bore because you had deliberately arranged that it should be invisible to me. (ARP&P 104)

Similarly she sees her husband in a compassionate light as he “ended isolate.” She feels compassion for these men and hates them as a part of the system rather than as individuals.

Rich acknowledges her connections to the Jews destroyed in the pogroms of World War II. Eventually, she rejects the notions of special destiny that have inspired repeated missions by the Jews to build a city on a hill from Jerusalem to the New World, Projecting a liberal feminist vision, in spite of its radicalism, Rich dedicates herself to an “end of suffering”:

I mean knowing the world, and my place in it, not in order to stare with bitterness or detachment, but as a powerful and womanly series of choices: and here I write the words, in their fullness; powerful womanly. (ARP&P 26)

Rich’s vision, based on a commitment to write of women’s actual lived experience is in fact a counter response to the egotistical subjectivity of male romantics, the architects of patriarchy.
In *The Fact of a Doorframe*, Rich offers updated selected poems covering the years 1950 to 1984. Among the six new poems in the collection, 'In the Wake of Home' is also a retrospective with the poet probing again her relationship with her demanding father:

my Jewish father writing me
letter of seventeen pages
finely inscribed harangues
questions of loyalty and punishment ... a bad daughter. . .  (*FD* 323).

Translating her personal unhappiness and psychological distress into sympathy for others who are oppressed, she asks:

What if I told you your home
is this planet of warworn children
women and children standing in line or milling
endlessly calling each others’ names. (*FD* 323).

But the monologue ends here abruptly and Rich again laments the limitations of language: "— will any of this comfort you", she asks, "and how should this comfort you?" (*FD* 323)

Time's Power: Poems 1985-1988 is serious, thoughtful and deeply sensitive especially to the experience of women. These are poems of introspection and historical significance. Rich seems to have come through much of her earlier rage as she writes in "Dreamwood":

... poetry
isn’t revolution but a way of knowing
why it must come (TP 35).

Addressing herself to the issues of war, racism and gender, Rich portrays exemplary women. In 'Letters in the Family' she offers three epistolary monologues by strong women in crises - one writing from the Spanish Civil War, one from behind Nazi lines in Yugoslavia and another from South Africa today. 'Harper's Ferry' is an American Civil War narrative evoking the image of an abused white woman who is a slave to her patriarchal family. The articulate anger of Rich's earlier poems is still present but set against a life lived with "no sudden revelation but the slow / turn of consciousness", as she says in the book's final sequence called 'Turning'.

Commenting on Adrienne Rich's style in this book, Jay Parini calls it "bright shards of thought and feeling held in loose communion by an overarching, frequently angry voice" (14). While Rich has not lost her sense of outrage, warmth often supplants the angry tone of her previous work, just as the impersonal pronouns of her earlier poems are now replaced by "you", "I" and "we". This suggests the moral authority that she has achieved through her personal efforts, to speak to her readers as individuals.
“Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, the essay in which Rich repudiates the “androgynous” alternative to patriarchy suggested in 'Diving into the Wreck', challenged all feminists – lesbian and straight, female and male - to purge themselves of heterosexism which Rich identified as the source of patriarchal power. By writing poems about ancient chthonic mysteries, by reconnecting daughters and their mothers, by comparing contemporary women and their historical counterparts, by envisioning women of the future who will participate and emerge from the feminist struggle, Rich celebrates women’s strength and their power of creation. Rich, then, regards feminism as a pluralistic ideology cutting across divisions of race, caste and nationality:

If we conceive of feminism... as an ethics, a methodology, a more complex way of thinking about, thus more responsibly acting upon, the conditions of human life, we need a self knowledge which can only develop through a steady, passionate attention to all female experience. I cannot imagine a feminist evolution leading to radical change in the private /political realm of gender that is not rooted in the conviction that all women’s lives are important; that the lives of men cannot be understood by burying the lives of women; and that to make visible the full meaning of women’s experience, is now the most important task of thinking (LSS 213).

For feminists, struggle and constant action remain a necessary
part of the effort to create a new society. In 'The Spirit of Place' Rich calls upon her readers to participate in the real action:

Are we all in training for something we don’t name?
to exact reparation for things
done long ago to us and to those who did not

survive what was done to them whom we ought to honour
with grief with fury with action (WP 45).

Rich repeatedly observes throughout her work that women have not traditionally been permitted control over their bodies and their lives. Being the “others” of society, they have been considered passive and have been denied the reality of their primal experiences. Rich points out that discrimination against women in the labour market has denied them equal pay for equal work, the unfair property laws have prohibited women the control of their financial resources, anti-abortion laws do not allow women to decide whether or not to have children, the male dominated medical profession has discouraged women from determining the circumstances of their children’s births, thus alienating them from the whole process of childbirth, the possibility of sexual assault or rape threatens women’s mobility in public places and pornographic images of women project them as objects of male sexual gratification and rob them of positive images of themselves. Rich observes that in
such a world women feel dominated, embattled, tyrannized and victimized and often internalize their anger as self-hatred and depression. Feminists have attempted to create an alternative social order in which anger is not internalized as depression, rape is not excused as feminine surrender, female self-sacrifice is not seen as an instrument of redemption of men and the horror of war is not justified as a need to protect territorial sovereignty.

Rich contends that by substituting abstractions for actual experience, it is possible to pollute the earth because the connection between human existence and other forms of life is lost. Rape is condoned because empathy for the victim is absent. War is perceived in terms of victory or loss and not in terms of human devastation and suffering or the destruction of resources. Rich laments this patriarchal dominance at the expense of multiplicity of experience. Of Woman Born concludes with a positive vision:

We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bring forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console and alter human existence – a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meaning; thinking itself will be transformed

(OWB 285-86).
However, feminism in the United States has been torn by two opposing perspectives. There are those who advocate a pluralistic approach to the study of gender and culture, while, on the other hand are those who are in favour of focusing more rigorously on the female response to a society that is inimical to the values of women. While the pluralists stress the importance of individual conviction and personal inclination, the antipluralists believe that ideological permissiveness leads to the ultimate supremacy of the patriarchal establishment. But feminism as an international socio-cultural movement is not concerned with a narrow range of beliefs but with ways to achieve an ideal of social equality for women and men. Sociologists and social theorists have consistently observed that the conflict between opposing systems of social thought invariably results in a dialectics that leads to social change. Rich insists on the power of feminism to resolve dualities:

Feminism – woman’s consciousness ultimately has to break down that dichotomy (between masculine power and feminine powerlessness). Once you stop splitting the inner and the outer, you have to stop splitting all these other dichotomies, which I think proceed from that. Yourself - other, head–body, psyche-politics, them - us. The good society would be one in which those divisions would be broken down, and there would be much more flow back and forth. (ARP 119)

Because women constitute such a large chunk of the population,
any movement that mobilizes them has potential for substantial social change. Rich has observed that:

... poetry is among other things, a criticism of language

... poetry is above all a concentration of power of language, which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe (LSS 248).

Because consciousness responds to language, speech must encompass the whole range of female perceptions to bring about any social change. The necessity for a change of language to create a more complex awareness of women's experience is then central to Adrienne Rich's poetic and political vision. Rich insists on "decentring" the linguistic universe which supports the patriarchal hold on women—embedded habits of language need to be displaced, old words need to be resounded, new meanings need to be explored and discovered and a new linguistic orders founded. In 'Tear Gas' she elaborates the nature of this new lingua franca:

... a language to hear myself with

to see myself in

a language like pigment released on the board

blood-black, sexual green, reds

veined with contradictions

bursting under pressure from the tube

staining the old grain of wood (PSN 139).
Rich’s work clearly seeks to bridge these “contradictions”, fuse these dichotomies embedded in patriarchal speech; “I am she : I am he”. Rich has access to the full range of human experience as she allows these traditional dichotomies of female and male roles to dissolve within her mind and her poetry. By experiencing the active and the passive simultaneously, Rich reclaims the active part that is usually attributed to men and sees herself as the architect of her own creativity. The prescriptive code that defines women as receptive and men as creative no longer accords with the poet’s experience as a woman. Though many feminists have suggested androgynous behaviour as a synthesis of masculine and feminine responses, Rich has recently opposed the use of the word ‘androgyny as it is grounded in opposition and fails to adequately express the fluidity and variety of experience.

Rich argues that the word lesbian more accurately describes a woman who commands her own energy. The concept of the “lesbian continuum”, according to Rich includes:

- a range — through each woman’s life and throughout history of woman identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male — tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and
political support... we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology that have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, most clinical definitions of "lesbianism." (LSS 51-52).

Rich’s conception of the lesbian continuum articulates a visionary approach to women’s experience, one designed to reduce women’s sense of isolation and expand access to a “usable past”. Though Rachel Blau Duplessis does not identify her book Writing Beyond the Ending as a piece of lesbian criticism, she accepts the validity of the concept and states:

... in part, Rich uses the term “lesbian feminist” as we have been using the terms “feminist” or “critical” throughout this study, to describe a person who has made an analytic severing from certain patriarchal cultural practices, whose acts of oppositional deliberation have brought her to the “other side of everything” – to the questioning of primary institutions of social, sexual and cultural organization. Rich’s stance is consistent with the perspective of all writers (Olive Schreiner, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, H.D., Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, Doris Lessing, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Denise Levertov etc.) who are the subject of this study (134).

Rich, then, attempts to arrive at a female centered or gynecocratic consciousness which is comprehensive, cooperative and collective, empathic
and nurturing, attempting to honour life in all its forms. Commenting on this ideology, Wendy Martin states:

Building on the romantic tradition, this feminist cosmology replaces mastery with mystery; certainty with empathy; control with understanding; division with connection; product with process; abstraction with texture; and predictability with variety. (AAT 232).

Rich strongly feels that women should use their powers to affect actual and personal changes and participate fully in the historical process of creation.

In her essay “When We Dead Awaken”, Rich had talked of the need for males to give birth to their own subjectivity by transforming their consciousness. Now she asks women to desist from becoming instruments of redemption for the male sex:

I think women have a mission to survive . . . and to be whole people. I believe that this can save the world, but I don’t think that women have a mission to clean up after men’s messes. I think we have to save the world by doing it for ourselves – for all women – I don’t mean some narrow, restricted notion of who women are, only white women or only middle-class woman and only western women (TCWM).

The feminist vision is thus a secular vision, a desire to save all
women rather than a select group. In her essay "Mining the Earth-Deposits: Women's History in Adrienne Rich's Poetry", Marianne Whelchel accurately describes Rich's progression "from poems focusing on the individual, named woman to those focusing on unnamed, 'ordinary' women or groups of women" (Reading AR 51-52). Rich concentrates on the lived experience of all women in the hope that feminist consciousness can foster an increasingly democratic and egalitarian society. She believes that there is no distinction between conditions of daily life and projected goal just as there is no disfunction between mind and body, nature and civilization, personal and political. At the same time, Rich is painfully aware of the irony that the new forms of thought, language and culture that express women's concerns must grow from the complex, paradoxical details of life itself. In 'What is Possible' she expresses these concerns beautifully:

A clear night. But the mind
of the woman imagining all this the mind
that allows all this to be possible
is not clear as the night
is never simple cannot clasp
its truths as the transiting planets clasp each other
does not so easily work free from remorse
does not so easily
manage the miracle
for which mind is famous
or used to be famous
does not at will become abstract and pure
this woman’s mind
does not even will that miracle
having a different mission
in the universe (WP 23).

Echoing feminist writers from Mary Wollstonecraft to Margaret Fuller and Virginia Woolf, Rich has attempted to create positive, public images of women to counteract the masculine acts of subjection of the female mind and objectification of the female body in society. Rich has been equally influenced by the romantic legacy of individualism as well as the feminist and modernist struggles for literary and social autonomy. Rich has explored the conflict, ambivalence and pain of a feminine psyche divided against itself by a tradition that does not allow women to perceive themselves as the source of their own creative energies. Her aim as a writer lies in the desire expressed in the title of a 1977 essay: “The Meaning of Our Love for Women is What We Have Constantly to Expand”.

Influenced by women poets as H.D, Marianne Moore, Sylvia Plath,
Edna St. Vincent Millay, Denise Levertov and Emily Dickinson, Rich has evolved a female aesthetics based on shared relationships and emotional and empathic identification. As a writer and as an activist, Rich projects the vision that:

If I cling to circumstances I could feel not responsible.
Only she who says she did not choose, is the loser in the end. (FD 44).

The choice, in turn, is distinguished by a commitment to “The fibers of actual life” and to change of the social order. She confesses the dynamics of her support:

I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power reconstitute the world. (FD 263)