Conclusion

If you had known me
once, you’d still know me now though in a different
light and life (ADW 4)

For about fifty years now, Adrienne Rich has been engaged in the intellectually stimulating and emotionally intense process of writing. An extremely prolific writer, her vast oeuvre includes more than fifteen volumes of poetry and about five books of essays. Rich has come a long way from the post-war formalism of *A Change of World* (1951) through the cultural deconstructions of *A Will to Change* (1971) to the lesbian–feminist reconstructions in *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986). Her latest works are *Dark Fields of the Republic : Poems 1991-1995* and *Midnight Salvage : Poems 1995-1998*.

Having been totally committed to the ideal of re-vision of lived experience and aesthetic expression, Rich has become increasingly conscious of her deepest feelings as a creative, thinking woman. She has sought to help other women collectively to re-vision their lives. For her, personal experience becomes both a source as well as a resource for studying the consciousness that bears the scars of an oppressive social system. Rich’s concept of re–vision lies in acknowledging these scars instead of denying them and using memory as a tool for exploring their causes as well as consequences. The most significant aspect of this re–vision
is a revelation of the ways in which one has participated in one's own oppression, the differences of race, gender or class notwithstanding. The process of re-visioning ultimately singles out patriarchal solipsism as the major cause of this oppression.

Intensely personal and increasingly political Rich's poetry challenges patriarchal institutions and attempts to found an alternative order based on a community of women.

Rich's works are, then, in the nature of an inquiry into the conflicts she has experienced as a woman and as an artist, an inquiry which results in a thorough exploration of her own life, history, redundant customs and other spiritdeadening powers of modern civilization. Gradually coming to terms with her own identity, Rich extends the process of exploration to a wider social context and philosophic debate which ultimately culminates in political action. During the sixties and the seventies, Rich's compassion for oppressed women resulted not only in her participation in several liberation movements of the period but had also necessitated the relocation of her position as a woman poet. Consequently, the early formal, conventional style made way for a distinctive voice that was capable of synthesising personal concerns with public issues. Rich's work and her life has been a spiritual quest, a metaphysical saga of blood, intellect and imagination concurrently.

While Rich's poetry is an effort to bring the unconscious to the conscious mind, her prose is a conscious theorising of the process of her evolution as a writer as well as a woman. Rich's earlier poems
reflect her struggle to come face to face with her personal conflicts, but the focus shifts gradually to the ways in which the political discourages both articulation and action. Of late she has been concerned with reconciling her lesbian feminist political insights with her personal experience. Rich’s poems, then, are a part of an open ended process which necessitates a constant re-visioning. The process of her evolution as, both, a woman and an artist has been variously interpreted as a passage through “phases of self-construction, political engagement and feminism” (Ostriker 103); a movement “from patriarchy to feminine principle” (ARP 175); a gradual recognition of “subjectivity” as the crucial link between private and public experience (Juhasz 197) and a psychological journey leading to a greater engagement with animus (Albert Gelpi, ARP 138). However, the evolution in Rich’s work has been mainly a result of the poet’s growth from plain imitation to personal discovery and disclosure. 

The purpose of this research project was to analyse and explore the component of ‘rage’ in Adrienne Rich’s selected poems, and to elucidate how the expression of this complex emotion has led to a ‘catharsis’ for the poet as well as for the reader. The major difficulty in the elaboration of this theme however lay in the construction of a structure to prove these premises, perhaps due to Rich’s own anti-theorist stance. Like James Baldwin and Walt Whitman, Rich distrusts all systems, even those based on ideas she identifies with. Albeit, the division of Rich’s career into four phases recapitulates the process of her growth and evolution,
with *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) and *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) as the crucial transitional works.

The chronological study of Rich's poetic works significantly corresponds to the various stages in the process of arriving at an awakened consciousness through the process of re-visioning of experience. Re-visioning is preceded by an awareness of being subjugated and used in a male dominated culture and this, in turn, leads to the exploitation and analysis of cultural practices and institutions that have oppressed the feminine consciousness into a slumber. Re-visioning triggers off implosions in the female psyche which enables women to experience the basic emotions of pain and rage. While patriarchal culture considers the expression of anger in women as 'unfeminine' and a sign of madness leading to self hatred and despondency, re-visioning encourages women to fully experience and express this anger. Ultimately the woman writer uses this emotion of anger as a tool for exploring personal experiences which find expression in a language that abounds in images expressive of this transformation. This new poetic language which is charged with female anger, energy and the rhythms of struggle, proves to be a cathartic device for the writer as well as her reader and culminates in a new feminist vision.

The first two volumes of Rich's poetry which attracted the attention of established poets like W.H. Auden, Randal Jarrell and Donald Hall were written under the ubiquitous influence of a domineering father who constantly goaded her on "to work, work harder than anyone has
worked before” (Sources 14). This unremitted pressure resulted in poems that were as formal and tightly controlled as they were objective. Looking back on her early work twenty years later in the essay. “When We Dead Awaken : Writing as Re-vision” Rich acknowledges that her style was formed first by male poets but also clarifies:

... What I chiefly learnt from them was craft... In those years formalism was a part of the strategy – like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick barehanded... (Italics mine). (ARP&P 171)

In fact, so strong is the hold of patriarchy in her early poems that it foreshadows even the bolder concerns of her later works. The split that she experienced between the woman writing poems and the woman who defined herself by virtue of her relationship with men also betrays vestiges of the frustration and anger that she experiences and later in her life bids others to experience as well. The title A Change of World almost seems prophetic now, for, Rich’s subsequent works would mirror the radical changes about the occur in American Society, her own life and her poetry in the coming decades. In her conversation with Diane Wood Middlebrook Rich ruminates about her vocation as a poet at this early stage of her life:

... for a long time into my adult life, although I was publishing poems and acknowledged as a poet, I still found it very hard to say I was a poet, for very complex reasons. I think
it had to do with, first of all, the problem of defining oneself as an artist or a poet in America. But I think it also had to do with being female and the problem, particularly, for a young woman coming to maturity and starting out as a poet in the fifties, of defining herself by a vocation at all. (TCDM)

Rich is, in fact, talking about the double bind, in which, according to Suzanne Juhasz the woman poet has been confined for a long time. (Juhasz 1–6) Western Society has always considered the nature of lyrical poetry as incompatible with the essence of ‘femaleness’. A lyric poet must have aesthetic models in the ancients and must speak the language of esoteric literary forms. Literary theorists have always believed that in poetry, nature must be mediated through tradition, through an education in ancient rules. However, since the gates of classical education were closed to the woman writer for a long time it was clear that she could not be a poet anyway. The theme validated for the woman writers in a partiaarchal society then, remained love in its various manifestations – as source of suffering, as unfulfilled dreams, as a medium of victimization. This myth of romantic love proved to be a debilitating influence on the female psyche, marring its creativity and constructiveness. It is only with the woman’s awareness of the tremendous masculine power over her that she rose out of her slumber and decided to write as a member of her own sex.

Rich’s “breakthrough” volume appeared after eight years. Stressing Rich’s growing concern with her situation as a woman defined by her
relationship to men, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* anticipated the intense struggle for personal integrity as well as political understanding that characterizes her works. Rich now began to examine the questions of female identity, the position of women in society and the relationship of women to one another. Stylistically too, the volume marked a transition. In this volume Rich moved from her earlier tightly controlled, rhymed stanzas to experimenting with more open structures and rhythmically flexible lines. Though she was not yet ready for writing the extremely self-revealing pieces that Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell and the other "confessional" poets wrote, she began to draw more extensively on her own experiences as an American woman, wife and mother.

Undeterred by the negative criticism that this volume drew, Rich published her next volume *Necessities of Life: Poems 1962-1965*. The title poem of this volume announces a process of autogenesis, "Piece by piece I seem to re-enter the world". Rich had now begun to probe more deeply into the experiences of complex marital, filial and maternal relationships. At this juncture, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam also led to her active participation in anti-war protests as well as her support of the Black and Puerto Rican Students Coalition at City College.

Rich's feminism had been taking shape very gradually "in a very isolated... way almost without a language." She was greatly influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's classic *The Second Sex* but also felt that there was no one with whom she could share her ideas about the book. But
by 1967, following the "second wave of the women's liberation movement", there was an explosion of women talking to each other . . . ” and she recalls.

There was a tremendous sense of passionate anger, validated anger, anger that was no longer suppressed or whispered, and creativity. (Rich, *ARP&P* 249)

In her next collection, *Leaflets: Poems 1965-68*, Rich expressed her own creativity and her anger. We also notice Rich's intense responses to the war, the college campus rebellions, Black Power and other social and political upheavals during this period. But one unifying concern in the volume has consistently been the idea that has been at the heart of the feminist movement – that the personal is political.

Rich's next volume, *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-70* was an elaboration of the major concerns in *Leaflets*. Rich now began to address herself to the larger issues of political change and social justice. While recognizing language as a patriarchal device – the "oppressors language" – she also realized its significance in the articulation of experience.

*Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972* remains Rich's most phenomenal work. Rich now took the bold step of articulating her political vision in uncompromisingly feminist terms and established herself as a major voice in the women's movement. In the poems in this volume, Rich attempted to envision an alternative culture, practically and metaphorically woman-centred. Repudiating the premises of patriarchy,
Rich sought a sense of personal integrity based on the acceptance of shared experience. This integrity would then go on to nurture a community capable of transforming the linguistic, institutional and mythological premises of patriarchy.

Though Rich is at her angriest in this volume, her rage also proves to be cathartic for her. Her optimism blazes forth in the image of androgyne, signifying the rewriting of old myths and the creation of new definitions of humanity that would go on to bridge the chasm created by a divisive patriarchy. In fact, we notice that Rich’s poems thrive on, as well as feed her rage. Rich also draws parallels between the oppression of women and the industrial exploitation of environment, as both are a consequence of the masculine need for mastery and dominance. Rich’s emotion of rage is then, necessary for her as it is a “visionary anger cleansing (her) sight” (Rich, *ARP&P* 52).

Rich’s androgynous vision however soon gave way to her public advocacy of a lesbian separatist position in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems* 1974–1977 and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems* 1978–1981. Although Rich now probed the daunting issues of language and presented an optimistic vision of a feminine commune, her mood in these later volumes is darker as she still sees a world little changed and even seeks to revise her own poetic means and frames of reference. Her next volumes, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New* 1950-1984 and *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems* suggested Rich’s re-visioning of her feminist separatist

Since the 1960s, Rich has struggled to develop a poetic voice which poses a serious challenge to the dominant values of existing political and aesthetic premises. She has then remained remarkably free of long-term fixation on any particular 'alternative' approach. Rather she has continually sought to deconstruct ideological systems that attempt to establish fixed terms for perceiving the self. While she has not lost her sense of outrage, warmth often supplants the angry tone of her previous work, as the personal pronouns of her earlier poems are now replaced by "you", "I" and "we".

Meditating on the role and function of a woman writer in her conversation with Wendy Martin, Rich states:

> When the woman writer takes pen in hand, she has been in some way, even if in only a small way, seizing power-seizing some of that male power, that logos and saying 'I'. (Rich, *TCWM*)

Although Rich has been influenced by the open-ended writing of such poets as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and Denise Levertov as well as the confessional mode of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and
John Berryman she has evolved a poetic strategy that is distinctly her own in her poetry which is an unusual combination of aesthetics and activism. Rich is consistently committed to the ideals of communication, social change and a woman-entered community. Her “dream of a common language” is realised through the incorporation in her poetry of political slogans of the antiwar and women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, excerpts from women’s diaries, essays, letters and even diction from conversation and internal monologue that captures the anger of women trivialized in a patriarchal society.

Rich has, then, committed herself to writing poetry that will be catalytic to social change. As a radical feminist, Rich realizes the need to transform all relationships in order to create an egalitarian society. This transforming is an essential restructuring that entails a re-visioning of the social ethos as also of linguistic generalizations that sustain patriarchal assumptions – the matrix of ‘reality’. The process engenders exploring repressed experiences, defining and naming these perceptions, creating new meanings and incorporating them in daily life. Since ‘naming’ essentially remains the prerogative of a poet, the act of writing assumes primal significance in the process of the revival of consciousness. Rich, prophesying a community of women and of female energy free from patriarchal repression, calls for a feminist vision that will bring about:

The transformation of society and of our relation to all life . . . It goes far beyond any struggle for civil liberties or equal rights – necessary as those struggles continue to be.
In its deepest, most inclusive form it is an inevitable process by which women will claim our primary and central vision in shaping the future. (Rich, *LSS* 226)

As a woman, Rich’s life has encompassed a wide range of experiences. She has been a Radcliffe undergraduate, a wife and mother of three sons, a much admired and recognized poet who has received numerous awards including the National Book Award, a university professor, a social activitist, a feminist and a lesbian. At every stage of her life, Rich has grown, shed her skin and evolved. Her emphasis has been to create social and artistic forms that express women’s actual experience. Her poetic vision is an exploration of new human and communal possibilities. Painting the picture of a woman centred society, Rich envisions:

I simply believe that human society is capable of meeting the fundamental needs of all human beings: we can give them a minimum standard of living, we can give them an education, we can create an environment which is more healthy to live in, we can give people free medical care. We can provide these things for everyone in the society. We’re not doing it, and I don’t think there is any male system that is gong to do that. (Rich, *TCWM*)

Although, at the outset, her vision seems like a Byzantine Utopia, it is understandably a sincere articulation of the nurturing ethos of the feminine
instinct that seeks total transformation of power structures.

Denigrating the institutions by which women have traditionally been controlled – institutionalised motherhood, economic exploitation, the nuclear family, compulsory heterosexuality, romantic love – Rich seeks an alternative power structure in which:

... Power, instead of a thing to be hoarded by few, would be released to and from within the many, shared in the form of knowledge, expertise, decision making, access to tools as well as in the basic form of food and shelter and health care and literacy. (Rich, Blood 5)

While in her earlier volumes, Rich uses anger as a medium of emotional and psychic purgation, it later assumes the proportions of a virulent emotion which gives way to a radical lesbian voice. This is because she has given up trying to understand men or even sympathising with them. She now seeks an alternative community capable of bringing forth its own consciousness through female bonding. Rich’s movement and evolution as a writer has essentially been one from androcentric through androgynous to gynocentric modes of writing.

Though primarily seen as a political and polemical poet, even as recklessly uncontrolled, Rich refrains from lecturing in her poems. Instead she advocates the power of patience, even when wild, over the force of aggression. At the same time, like Emily Dickinson, she seeks to “have it out on her own premises”, the premises of a poet 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 (Rich, *CEP* 322).