Chapter 4

Crossing the Cultural Borders

A comparative study of the poetical works of Adrienne Rich and Kamala Das signifies a cross-cultural concern since they belong to two entirely dissimilar cultures, nationalities and even continents. But in spite of the marked difference in their lives, a general awareness regarding the marginality of their existence is shared by them as women inhabiting the present-day world. The general perception of reality by women is one coloured by frustration since they share a sense that their interests and standing remain subsidiary to those of men. Feminist criticism claims that women's experience provides a cultural context which plays a vital role in moulding women's writing. The notion of a cultural context based on gender is not new, for established criticism "already assumes a masculine context, which it considers to be universal" (Farwell 140). Literature, a masculine enterprise, developed and perpetuated by men, is a socializing institution that shapes both men and women. Millett and Ellmann along with other feminist literary critics have suggested that there is an inherent bias in existing theories and they have sensitized the literary world to the need for the development of a cultural theory that gives primacy to sexual identity.

Feminist criticism wants a cultural context that takes into consideration the reality of the writer's experience, the psychology and socialization of the individual writer, for its claim is that sexual identity is itself a context that can differentiate styles, structures and perspectives in literature. (Farwell 140 - 41)

The polaric ways in which reality is apprehended and projected by men and women, one objective and the other subjective, may be explained on the basis of the essential difference in the qualities of male and female psyche,
which in turn, may be traced back to the difference in the socialization processes, or acculturation, of men and women. The patriarchal tendency to consider the qualities of the male as standard and universal and those of the female as substandard has no basis in history other than the primitive practice that might be right. This points to the need for a re-evaluation of the positive feminine qualities such as empathy and subjectivity and to understand how important they are in shaping human personality. Since these qualities are indispensable for peaceful co-existence and a responsible way of living, they should be nurtured in men as well as women. The assumption that the poetry of the two women poets, one occidental and the other oriental, shares certain common characteristics is not surprising. As Marilyn Farwell suggests, women's experience provides a cultural context that is common to women writers in general. Their "common heritage of suffering and fragmentation shapes their perspective" and contributes to the assertion of surprisingly identical values in "life and literature, irrespective of their cultural background" (140). It is with the underpinning of this assumption that a comparative reading of the poetry of Adrienne Rich and Kamala Das is attempted in this thesis.

Rich is a committed feminist who has found her life's mission in propagating the cause of woman and fighting ardently for the liberation of women the world over, upholding the value of global sisterhood. Pride in the state of being a woman, a quality all-pervasive in her writing, is a distinguishing mark of her poetry. Her process of constructing womanhood in its diversity, depicting images of women in different backdrops in poetry is always political. She experiments with different forms of consciousness in her poetry so that it provides women access to their own potential. She is fully conscious of her being -- of her identity, as a white, Jewish and lesbian woman in America and there is a strain of
autobiography running through all her poetry.

Compared to Rich, the appellation "feminist" can be used with respect to Das only with some qualification. For one thing, Das finds it difficult to look upon man as an enemy; nor does she think that submission as a wife can be threatening to the selfhood of a woman. However it is against a cultural background of inhibitions and taboos that this woman poet successfully manages to have her firm voice made distinctly audible. The self that is revealed through her poetry is definitely female, radical and competent enough to subvert conventional norms and traditions. Her poetry does not merely mirror the experience of women; as Nabar points out, there is even "a drive to explore obsessions" (102). She is an ardent supporter of the cause of woman and raises her voice against woman being victimized. Her refusal to conform to the conventions of society led her to write My Story through which she attempted to shock the male-dominated society into a realization of its decadent state. Through her poetry of protest, which finds its outlet in the form of poems which have as their themes extramarital relationships, victimization of women and their smouldering frustration, she exhorts the community of women to revolt against patriarchal injustice.

Since the comparative study of these two women poets is on feminist lines, the five foci of gender difference -- biological, cultural, experiential, psychoanalytic and linguistic, discussed in detail in the chapter "The Politics of Gender" -- are applied to their poetry. An attempt to interpret the poetry of Rich and Das on the basis of these five models is made in this chapter and the next, "The Dream of a Common Language." This chapter comprises the biological, cultural and experiential models of difference.

According to the proponents of the biological aspect of 'difference,' it is the
biological factors which are basic in determining the difference between the
sexes. Firestone, the chief proponent of the biological school of difference points
out that nature produced the fundamental inequality, making it necessary for
half the human race to bear and rear the children of all, which was later
consolidated and institutionalized in the interests of men. She reflects that
reproduction of the species cost women dearly, not only emotionally,
psychologically and culturally, but even physically. Before recent methods of
contraception were invented women suffered from health problems, early ageing
and death because of continuous childbirth. By virtue of their biology, women
had become the slave class that maintained the species.

Rich reflects that she knows no woman for whom her body is not a basic
problem: "its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its
bloody-speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripenings."
She exhorts women to transcend these and convert their "physicality into both
knowledge and power" (Of Woman Born 284). Regarding the resources of female
biology which have not yet been probed Rich asserts:

Female biology . . . has far more radical implications than we have
yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female
biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has
recoiled from female biology for these reasons: it will, I believe, come
to view our physicality as a resource rather than as destiny. In order
to live a fully human life, we require not only to conquer our bodies
. . . we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the
corporeal ground of our intelligence (Of Woman Born 62).

It should be remembered that the female body which was considered impure
and taboo for long, according to patriarchal standards has become the source of
imagery in feminist writing. Feminists in general and the French feminists in particular, glory in "writing the body," thus celebrating womanhood. They sensitize the woman community to the need to cultivate respect and affection for her own body. It is the male perception of the female body as impure that has instilled in women's minds disaffection for her body. Rich exhorts women that they should neither "become their bodies" blindly and slavishly in obedience to male theories nor should they try to "exist in spite of them" (285).

The fact that woman is not mere body but is endowed with an entity of her own is maintained by Rich in the following lines: "...I am myself, / like anyone, like a man / whose body contains simply itself" ("The Fourth Month of the Landscape Architect"); and, again, in the same poem she states:

...I am not
a body, I am no body, I am I

A city waits at the back of my skull

eating its heart out to be born... (Poems Selected 224)

Rich urges women to explore their "biological grounding, the miracle and paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meaning" (Of Woman Born 284). They should at last begin to "think through the body": "to connect what has been so cruelly disorganized -- our great mental capacities, hardly used; our highly developed tactile sense; our genius for close observation; our complicated, pain-enduring, multi-pleased physicality" (Of Woman Born 284).

Rich exhorts women to remember that the quality of the mother's life is her primary bequest to her daughter (247). A woman who has respect and affection for her own body, who does not view it as unclean or as a sex-object will wordlessly transmit to her daughter a healthy view about a woman's body.
It is no less important "to feel pride in being female" in which case her female child will not be a victim of self-deprecation (245). In "Transcendental Etude" Rich narrates how "the homesickness for a woman" is quite natural in a woman even though the patriarchal society condemns it:

for that acute joy at the shadow her head and arms cast on a wall, her heavy or slender thighs on which we lay, flesh against flesh, eyes steady on the face of love; smell of her milk, her sweat, terror of her disappearance, all fused . . .

.This is what she was to me. . . (89)

Celebration of the female body is a notable feature in the writings of some feminists. It is, in fact, a challenge to woman’s body being considered taboo by many societies and confined to "a lower realm where women sweated, excreted, grew bloody every month, became pregnant and emitted smells" (Rich, Of Woman Born 220). In Das's poetry it is such celebration of the female body as advocated by Rich and other feminists that can be seen. With a view to celebrating her sense of liberty and to achieving consummation, the woman persona in Das's poetry is prepared to abandon all pretence to being modest and speaks in a free and frank manner, as in the following lines:

. . . Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. . . . ("The Looking Glass" Only the Soul 55)
In these lines "a fiercely feminine poetic sensibility" which is entirely different from that of Toru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu can be perceived. In this respect Das's poetry marks the "advent of a new phase" in the annals of Indian poetry in English (Asnni 75).

It should be pointed out that an explanation of the social phenomenon of gender difference in terms of biological factors has drawn very few supporters among feminists. The main objection of feminists against accepting the validity of the biological theory of difference is that it would be tantamount to suggesting that a woman's body is her destiny and that there is no escape from it. Such a view, in turn, would invalidate the questioning of gender roles. It is the practice of attributing gender roles that confines woman to home and housework, forcing her to lead a marginal existence.

Activists like de Beauvoir and Millett insist on the individuating differences between women which point to their selfhood as individuals; besides, they assert unequivocally that factors other than biological are responsible for the essential differences between the sexes.

The cultural factor of difference between the sexes can be traced in matters of role, temperament and status. Showalter states that a theory of culture incorporates ideas about woman's body, language and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur (259).

Rich questions the injustice of the patriarchy which has never given woman a chance to define her sphere of action. She points out how unfair it is on the part of society that women are required to limit themselves to those activities and functions men consider appropriate for them. She emphatically states that it is unjust to confine women to the accepted roles of "mothers and muses for men" ("WWDA" 98). In "Coast to Coast" Rich portrays a woman who has been
enslaved to housework and undervalued domestic chores, following the traditional division of labour: "There are days when housework seems the only outlet old servitude" (A Wild Patience 30).

In "Toward the Solstice", too, she gives a vivid picture of a woman who is caught in a vicious circle of work from which release is not likely to "come from anywhere / but from inside myself":

... performing
the loving humdrum acts
of attention to this house
transplanting lilac suckers,
washing panes, scrubbing
wood-smoke from splitting paint,
sweeping stairs, brushing the thread
of the spider aside,
and so much yet undone.
a woman's work, the solstice nearing,
and my hand still suspended
as if above a letter
I long and dread to close  (Dream 71).

Das too finds it problematic to conform to the "angel-in-the-house" image which a typical Indian woman is expected to live up to. Despite being born into an orthodox Hindu family which respected and observed the traditional values and practices, Das showed the courage to question the gender roles and to challenge the long accepted practices and attitudes, nurtured by the male-dominated society. She knew very well that she was expected to "fit in" to the roles failing to do which would incur for her the displeasure of the categorizers.
as she depicts in her well-known poem "An Introduction": "Dress in sarees, be
girl or be wife, / they cried. Be embroiderer, cook or a quarreller / with servants.
Fit in, belong, said the categorizers." However she refused to be persuaded by
their efforts and was resolved to refuse to fit into any scheme to comply with
their wishes. She has given vent to her anguish in My Story: "My mother-in-
law sulked, for she felt that I was spending too much time away from my child
and my domestic responsibilities. Whenever she said disgruntled things my
husband grew angry, and his anger was directed against me and the baby"
(97-98).

She narrates how her husband forbade her from "going up to the terrace
for rehearsals in the evening." She was reminded every now and then that she
was a wife and mother. There was impotent rage waxing within her about
which she has written in the following words: "I kept myself busy with dreary
housework while my spirit protested and cried, 'get out of this trap, escape''
(98).

In one of her Anamalai poems, Das refers to the phase in the life of a
woman that comes between early youth and weary age as one of "opaque" nature
muddied by fingerprints, trapped in meaninglessness; it is as if life has come to
a long pause during that stage of life, a long blank which does not have any
logical meaning to yield:

Life yields its true meaning only
in early youth or in weary
age. The middle is an opaque
glass pane, muddied by finger prints.
In meaninglessness, trapped, I must
so remain... (157)
The attitude of the woman persona reflected through these lines is comparable to the one projected through Rich's poem "Toward the Solstice."

The constant demands made on a woman by her family makes her wonder whether she has become part of a traditional system which leaves her unidentifiable as a person. She wonders whether some rite of separation is still unaccomplished between herself and the distant past and between the childhood of her children and herself. A similar image of a woman who has used herself up is projected by Rich in "Necessities of Life":

\[
\ldots \text{Scaly as a dry bulb} \\
\text{thrown into a cellar} \\
\text{I used myself, let nothing use me.} \\
\text{Like being on a private dole.} \ (19)
\]

Feminists who uphold personal freedom, naturally enough, experience great difficulty in conforming to the roles defined for them by society and re-enforced by custom. Rich's "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" provides us with a peep into the lives of women destined to live "behind closed windows blankening with steam" (11). However the poet is well aware of the fact that male-dominated society would not be prepared to forgive women in the least if they are presumptuous enough to cast a shadow that is remarkably bold or to smash the prescribed mould outright; the transgressors will certainly be punished severely, as Rich points out.

Das has effectively portrayed the turbulence experienced by a young woman who is forced to lead a life of conformity, making obeisance to the written and unwritten codes and practices. In "An Introduction" her persona is little more than a girl who is told that she is no more a child but has grown up and has to regulate her life accordingly. When she finds it difficult to come to terms with
their perception of her as a woman and to accept a woman's role, she gives vent to her rebellious mood by cutting her hair short and dressing like a boy: ". . . Then I wore a shirt / and a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of / this womanliness" (12). As she indicates in the same poem, a girl is subject to numerous inhibitions in a male-dominated society. The "categorizers" of society impose a number of restrictions on her: "Don't play pretending games. Don't play at schizophrenia / or be a nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when / jilted in love. . ." (13).

Rich, too has brought out the internal conflict a young girl has necessarily to undergo in a patriarchy. It is quite natural that she will be torn between the culture she has imbibed from the society and her innate ambition for a life of her own. Until quite recently the tendency on the part of women was to take all the effort to conform to "the feminine mystique" image. Rich brings out the radical difference in the outlook of a mother and daughter in this respect in the poem "Snapshots." The mother persona was once a "belle in Shreveport" who was selective about her dress and accomplished in music, or, in other words, one who tried to conform to the approved image of the "feminine mystique." But now her mind is "moldering like wedding cake, / heavy with useless experience" and "crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge / of mere fact" even though she is still in the prime of life (9). We are led to conclude that she is leading a meaningless existence in a way reminiscent of Denis Diderot's words: "You all die at fifteen" (11). Since life of a woman in the traditional sense is nothing other than biological, with the culmination of the biological function in childbirth, her life becomes superfluous.

Rich points out that the way this woman's daughter grows is quite different. She writes: "Nervy, glowering, your daughter / wipes the teaspoons, grows
another way." The poet is apparently hopeful about the symptoms of change she perceives in the attitude of the young generation of women. The mental turbulence experienced by the young is indicative of the change which will affect their lives sooner or later. The young woman who is portrayed in section 2 of "The Snapshots" becomes aware of the fact that her identity is distinctly different from that of the women she has been given as models. She experiences anguish and tension because she is not quite sure of the course she should take. She is torn between the desire for a liberated self on the one hand and the voice of conformity on the other. Like Joan of Arc she hears voices, those which require her to conform; but her own inner voice bids her not to sacrifice herself: "Have no patience. . . . Be insatiable. . . . Save yourself; others you cannot save" (9).

As Judith McDaniel remarks, the voices which demand her to conform are not the voices of angels, but of monsters, the inevitable accompaniment of growing self-awareness and self-involvement for women" (313). These monsters have their origin within the awakened self-consciousness of the woman for, as Rich writes in the same poem. "A thinking woman sleeps with monsters" imbibing the culture of the society (9). It may be observed that these monsters are presented by Rich in sharp contrast to the established "angel-in-the-house" image approved and sanctioned by the patriarchy.

As Rich observes in "Twenty-One Love poems", "the woman who cherished / her suffering is dead" (81). The modern woman would not be submissive enough to give in without putting up a fight:

If I give in it won't
be like the girl the bull rode,

but to be wrestled like a boy,
with tongue, hips, knees, nerves, brain...

with language  ("The Demon Lover" 31)

Though woman in a male-dominated society is expected to play the primary roles of wife, housekeeper and mother, it is the role of mother which is considered most significant in the life of a woman and which is supposed to endow it with meaning. Roland Barthes makes a plain statement about woman’s function on earth in the following words: "Women are on earth to give children to men." He makes it clear that he has no objection to women engaging themselves in writing or in decorating their condition; however he wants them not to depart from their "destined role as mothers" (Mythologies 50).

It is not surprising that Rich has commented on woman’s status as childbearer being projected into a major fact of her life by patriarchal manipulations. Those women who remain unmarried or those who do not bear children are treated with scant respect by society. The mother image is imposed on woman by the established society to the exclusion of all other identities, thus confining her to the four walls of her home.

Rich, in "To a Poet" describes "the little, nameless acts" that are involved in child care such as "scraping the egg crust from the child’s / dried dish skimming the skin / from cooled milk  wringing diapers" (Dream 15). In the concluding lines of the poem the poet expresses her wonder "no one calls this murder / Small mouths, needy, suck you. This is love" she reminds herself. In "Orion" Rich writes: "children are . . . eating crumbs of my life" (30).

It is noteworthy that there is no pretence to maternal fulfilment in these lines; on the contrary a sense of the exploitation to which the protagonist is subjected in her capacity as mother is very well brought out. In this respect, the views of Das also seem to converge as indicated by the following line in
"Daughter of the Century": "Each mother suckles her own enemy" (140), even though it happens to be an idea taken from the Bhagavad Gita.

Probably a major reason for motherhood being an unwieldy burden for woman is the fact that it is usually regarded as an exclusive vocation of hers. The father usually takes little care or effort in bringing up the children. Das has expressed this idea in her poem, "Larger Than Life Was He": "I reared three sons, / he was too busy to watch them grow." She goes on to describe how he used to peer into his office files till the supper turned cold and the children went to sleep (Only the Soul 112).

Benjamin Spock, author of Baby and Child Care, who popularized the concept of child-centred child-rearing worldwide expanded motherwork to include the role of home psychologist. He insisted that the mother should be watchful not only of the child's physical needs but also of her / his emotional states. Evidently he assumed that the mother has unlimited time and energy.

Rich cautions women regarding the burden of responsibility that is heaped on a woman in her capacity as a mother, in her prose work Of Woman Born. Raising a child is a lonely task which consumes unlimited time; besides, in a patriarchal society all the moral responsibility rests with the mother.

The power of woman as mother was threatening and disconcerting to man in the prehistoric times when birth and the forces of creation were still a mystery (Rich, Of Woman Born 110). This still happens to be the case, although in a relatively lesser degree. However, patriarchy sees to it that the child's bond with the mother lasts only so long as her services are indispensable. The "natural role" as mother which is made to appear all important to a woman scarcely earns her much respect or veneration once the child has come of age.

Das gives expression to a similar idea in "A Hand Like a Bonsai": "... the
mothers' Unloved suddenly in middle age. Oh this / World will crush me with its ways. . ." (Only the Soul 34). Das's poems "Middle Age" and "Death of the Goat" also deal with the theme of dejection experienced by a mother when the children pass into the phase of adulthood like pupae bursting their cocoons. The mother persona in "Middle Age" is shocked to realize that her children have ceased to be her friends and have started to criticize her; besides, they seem to need her no more except for "serving tea" and "pressing clothes."

In "Necessities of Life" Rich draws a parallel between the life of a married woman and mother and the daily kneading of the bricks in Egyptian bondage. The woman is "wolfed almost to shreds" by others. In another poem "Living Memory" Rich refers to a woman "with six children and a tumor like a seventh" (138).

It is quite clear that both Rich and Das project motherhood in a disillusioned and realistic manner. There is little suggestion of any fulfilment that is derived in the capacity of a mother. This is particularly so in the poetry of Rich. In her prose writings she cautions women against letting themselves be exploited in their maternal capacity. Unless and until woman can define herself in relation to the larger society and not just her own family, she cannot gain an identity of her own. In order to achieve this, woman has to transcend her role as mother and housewife.

Feminists consider that different ways are devised by patriarchy to keep female sexuality under subjugation. While woman is regarded as the sexual property of man on the one hand, she is the chaste mother of his children on the other. Thus as Michèle Barrett points out, men have procured "both the sanctity and inheritance of their families and their extra-familial sexual pleasure" (45).
The status accorded to woman as man's possession is something that freedom-loving women have ever been clamouring against. The institution of family according to the militants among feminists, is a mirror of the larger society. With its hierarchical structure and functioning with its established division of labour; with the father occupying the position of supreme importance, as the begetter and owner, the family acts as a unit in the polity of the patriarchal state. In a patriarchal family woman is only a property or possession owned by man and she is not invested with any selfhood of her own. De Beauvoir's vivid description of woman as the other of man who is the Absolute in a male-dominated society brings out her status as an object. For man, woman is just sex, defined and differentiated with reference to man. She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. De Beauvoir portrays woman in a patriarchal society as the perpetual object constrained to be passive and forbidden to be free. In the poem "Mother-Right" Rich describes how man considers the woman and child as well as "the grass, the waters underneath the air" his possessions. "The man is walking boundaries/measuring. He believes in what is his" (Dream 59). In the concluding lines Rich depicts the woman who is trying to make for the open in her attempt to escape from the stifling hold of the male-dominated world.

Das too is fully aware of the predicament of woman in a patriarchal society which deprives her of the status as a person. The feelings of despair and unhappiness fill the mind of the woman persona at the thought that she is a mere possession.

This body that I wear without joy, this body
burdened with lenience, slender toy owned
by man of substance shall wither, battling with his
impersonal lust... ("Gino" 57).

A demand made by feminists throughout the world is that they should have control over their own body. In the words of Gloria Steinem, "Women of every race are the only discriminated group with no territory, no country of their own, not even a neighbourhood. In a patriarchy a poor man's house may be his castle but even a rich woman's body is not her own" (qtd. in Anees Jung 11).

Rich has expressed the belief that the re-possession by women of their bodies would have a greater impact on human society than "the seizing of the means of production by workers" (Introd, Of Woman Born xvii). Such a situation would provide the ideal environment for the development of all potentialities possessed by woman enabling her to have visions and dreams about the betterment of the human race which would prove to be crucial. Later Rich brought in the idea that along with the free exercise by all women of sexual and procreative choice, certain other claims such as the "claim to personhood, the claim to a fair share of the products of human labour and more effective participation in decision-making should also be recognized" (New Foreword, Of Woman Born xviii). It is the culture of a patriarchal society that denies individual autonomy to women of all strata of society. Advocates of women's rights in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pursued long, often passionate struggles for individual autonomy and availability of equal opportunities.

In her poem "Heroines" Rich speaks about exemplary women of the nineteenth century whose ideas are so influential that their minds are said to be burning like a pyre of "driftwood" even long after their death. The term "driftwood" is apt in describing the plight of women since throughout their lifetime they are supposed to be protected by one or other male member of the family and hence are seen to be drifting from the custody of one person to that
Rich writes:

You belong first to your father
then to him who
chooses you
if you fail to marry
you are without recourse
unable to earn
a working man's salary
forbidden to vote
forbidden to speak
in public
if married you are legally dead
the law says
....................
that your husband
has the right
of the slaveholder
to hunt down and re-possess you
should you escape ("Heroines" A Wild Patience 33-34)

The idea that woman should always lead a protected life is an integral part of traditional Indian culture. According to the edicts of Manu, an approved codifier of sastras, in childhood woman should be in the custody of her father, on marriage she should be protected by the husband and in old age by her son. During no phase of her life is she allowed to have an independent existence. As has been observed by critics, Das's stance regarding gender problems is not quite in keeping with the attitude of feminist activists, even though "a strong
feminist self-consciousness" runs through all her writings (Raveendran, "Text as History" 52). It is possible to discern in the temperament of her women personae a lack of the sense of belonging, a feeling of estrangement, that she is an outsider in this world possessed by men, a feeling she shares in common with the feminists. In "A Widow's Lament" Das depicts a woman's perception of the world and her relation to it:

This has always been
someone else's world not mine.

My man, my sons, forming the axis
while I, wife and mother
insignificant as a fly
climbed the glasspanes of their eyes (Only the Sun 125)

The persona feels at a loss when she is all alone since her husband is no more and her sons have set forth for homes of their own. She feels that she is surrounded by packs of wolves which keep on howling and she prays to God for "a thick veil for her to shelter under." She feels that she is as helpless as a baby on being deprived of her husband. "He was a sunshade, he was my home" (125).

In Das one finds a typical Indian woman who finds it difficult to take the anti-male stance by virtue of which she does not find dependence on the male an excruciating experience. Probably her outlook is based on the conditioning through the ages which has left its mark on her ethnic consciousness. Poetry should articulate "women's actual lived experience" which will give a new dimension to literature according to feminists (Martin, An American Triptych 272). The "lived experience" of women incorporates within it not only the specifically female life experiences but also emotional and perceptual life which is essentially different from that of men. Recording the authentic experiences
of women will necessarily bring out the oppression of women over the ages since suffering has been an integral part of their lives. Tracing the pattern of suffering that emerges through their poetry will provide a substitute for the missing poetic tradition of women, according to feminists. Rich upholds the view that poetry articulates personal experience. However she finds some difference between the first two books of poetry she wrote and her later works; whereas her early works were poems about experiences the poems she has been writing since then "are experiences." She finds that "the poem itself engenders new sensations, new awareness in [her] as it progresses" ("Poetry and Experience" 89). The reason she gives for this is that she has been increasingly willing "to let the unconscious offer its materials, to listen to more than the one voice of a single idea" (89).

Das has also stated that the theme of her poetry is her personal experiences. Being a versatile writer, she finds it possible to write both poetry and prose based on the same experience. ("Of Masks" 149). She says that just like the world of reality with which a writer deals, there is another world which is only a shadow of this real world -- an unreal world. Her view is that a creative writer has to live in both these worlds simultaneously, enjoying the fruits of each world. This will enable the writer to add on to the experiences available in the real world (149 - 50).

It demands tremendous courage on the part of a writer to depict intimate experiences in her/his poetry. This is particularly so in the case of a woman writer because until quite recently woman in the patriarchal society has been leading a muted existence. Her physical experiences have been considered taboo by society. Many women poets have been acutely aware of the great price they have had to pay to be in a man's world, following his dictates. Rich gives
expression to what it means to be female in a man's world in the following lines in "Waking in the Dark":

The tragedy of sex
lies around us, a woodlot
the axes are sharpened for
.........................
A man's world. But finished.
...... I feel dazed
... Nothing will save this. I am alone,
kicking the last rotting logs
with their strange smell of life, not death
wondering what on earth it all might have become (50)

However, women writers have gathered the courage to write openly about their experiences, including physical experiences which were considered taboo until recently. Rich has recorded how difficult it was for her to write poems in the first person, without using the disguise of a persona to veil her real person. But once she succeeded in closing the gap between poet and woman, she realized that immense energy was being released in her. Ever since she wrote The Snapshots, nothing inhibited her writing. As Ostriker remarks, with the Snapshots volume, "the feeling of something inexplicably wrong has been transformed into cries that the house is on fire and the mind of the poet is ablaze" (Writing 108).

The confessional mode that Rich has adopted in writing poetry demands "a willingness to put oneself on the line," to expose one's follies and errors and one's conflicting desires. But "Rich's polemicism, coupled with what is evidently a natural reticence precludes such self-exposure" (Perloff,"Private Lives" 136).
This explains why she regularly takes her position outside experience. The stance taken by the poet in "Frame" may be cited as an example. In this poem she delineates the unjust manner in which an innocent young girl student who is not a white is physically assaulted and charged with "trespass, assault and battery" by two white men. In this poem the stance taken by Rich is that of a white woman who is "somewhere at the edge of the frame" who watches it all in silence (A Wild Patience 47).

Moreover, whenever she narrates personal experiences almost always she is "outside" experience. As Perloff points out, even when she is daughter, sister, daughter-in-law, lover or victim in the poem, she is "never quite the daughter of X or the lover of Y" (136). There is something elusive about her. It should also be noted that her characters are, almost always, abstractions or, at best stereotypes. This becomes clear when we take a look at the "heroines" who make their appearance in her poetry such as Anthony, Wollstonecraft or Dickinson or characters like her mother-in-law who can be anybody's mother-in-law, and need not necessarily be her own.

Das who has also adopted the confessional mode, seems to have no inhibitions in exposing her frailties and virtues as a woman. In "Loud Posters" she declares: "... I've stretched my two-dimensional / Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies, / Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice..." (39). She proudly displays her superior self as a mother and makes no attempt to conceal her despair as an exploited wife. She brings out her discontent as a child who was denied affection by her parents and the solace that only her grandmother could give her.

Das, whose poetry is celebrated for her treatment of man-woman relationships deals with her themes in such a frank and forthright manner.
that very often it oversteps the accepted parameters of "propriety" and "modesty." In "An Introduction," as has been stated earlier, she narrates in the first person the experience of a sixteen year old girl who asked for love. She was yet a child but they said she was grown up because physically she had become "tall, (her) limbs swelled and one or two places / sprouted hair." When out of innocence she asked for love, not knowing what else / to ask for," she met with an agonizing experience. The young girl was shut within the bedroom. "He did not beat me but my sad / woman - body felt so beaten. The weight of my breasts and / womb crushed me. I shrank pitifully." When she manifested her protest by dressing like a boy and ignoring all her womanliness, the categorizers of society were not ready to put up with her behaviour. They insisted that she should "dress in sarees, be girl or be wife . . ." She was expected to fit in some role or other chalked out for women by society. She was to choose a name, a role and not to play pretending games. Society would not be ready to forgive her if she played "at schizophrenia" or at being a "nympho." Even if she was jilted in love, she had to keep quiet and put on a dignified front instead of crying aloud in an embarrassing manner. The persona goes on to state how she met a man later and loved him. But we are administered a severe shock when she confides that "he is every man who wants his / woman, just as I am every woman who seeks love" (12-13).

Das, in spite of her Indian background which is remarkable for its conservative outlook, depicts intimate physical relationships in detail apparently without any inhibition. In "Convicts," for example, she writes about the physical union of two lovers in a stark manner, referring to it as "hacking at each other's parts / like convicts hacking, breaking clods." She writes:

... We were earth under hot sun.
There was a burning in our veins

..................

............... when he and
I were one we were neither
male nor female. (38)

Rich celebrates lesbian love with remarkable candour in "Twenty-One Love Poems." She portrays the physical relationship of two women in detail in "the floating poem, unnumbered" which is introduced between poems XIV and XV. In a daring, unorthodox manner, without caring in the least for the approval of society, she describes lesbian relationship:

Whatever happens with us, your body
will haunt mine . . . .

...............................

the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth -
your touch on me, firm, protective, searching
me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers
reaching where I had been waiting years for you
in my rose-wet cave . . . (83)

These lines constitute an affirmation of the persona's lesbianism. Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" is a fierce defence of women's choice of women as life partners and comrades. In her poem "The Phenomenology of Anger" she professes her love for women:

The only real love I have ever felt
was for children and other women

Everything else was lust, pity,
self-hatred, pity, lust (58)
In attacking conventional man-woman relationships Rich wants to make it explicit that fate plays no part in love. She states that no one is fated or doomed to love anyone: still she makes allowance for the fact that accidents can happen but women should not be fooled into believing that they are heroines. Such accidents can always be disastrous in the lives of women like "car crashes" ("Twenty-One Love Poems" XVII 84).

Das's persona finds it difficult to attain fulfilment in love through marriage. The idea that the love of man would complement her personality and make known to her further dimensions of her self had drawn her to him; but she is sadly disappointed. In "The Old Playhouse" Das deals with this theme:

"It was not to gather knowledge
of yet another man that I came to you but to learn
what I was and by learning, to learn to grow, but every
lesson you gave was about yourself..."

Instead of the growth of her personality what really happened as a result of this relationship was that there was a maiming of herself:

"... cowering
beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason... (100)"

She was being "tamed" like a swallow and persuaded to forget not only the raw seasons and the homes left behind but even her own nature, the urge to fly and the endless pathways of the sky. Through the poem, Das makes it evident how deadly the influence of marriage can be on women. It entails the inevitable loss of freedom. As she writes in her poem "Freedom" a woman's spinal cord was never meant to be the "axis" for her "dizzy revolving world." In this poem she states that the very fact of existence in this world as "matter, confirmed by
the logic of the senses" amounts to the giving up of freedom. Her surmise is that the real world cannot offer her freedom: "to dream is to be free."

Probably such a view is the result of her being "twice an outsider" to the culture in which she lives, by being a woman in a male-dominated society and by virtue of her Jewish legacy. Rich is of the view that the word "love" itself is in need of "re-vision" ("WWDA" 97). She states that woman in a patriarchal society is compelled to make a choice between 'love' and egotism. What they mean by 'love' is something 'womanly,' maternal and altruistic -- a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture: egotism is, in fact, a force, which the men alone are permitted to direct into creation, achievement and ambition often at the expense of others. But men justify it as their destiny in life just as "womanly love" is deemed the destiny of women. As a Jew she finds it almost impossible to think of romantic love since the persecution and massacre of thousands of her race seem to weigh down her consciousness. It is significant that rarely does she attempt to write a poem of love. In "Charleston in the Eighteen-Sixties" something that comes close to a poem on romantic love. She writes: "He seized me by the waist and kissed my throat... / Your eyes, dear... / eyes of an angel." But it is clear that the poet's obsession with the past "years, death, depopulation fears / bondage..." makes it difficult for her to pursue the romantic theme: 'The carts have passed already with their heaped / night-soil, we breathe again..." She is well aware of "the black / cloud ahead of (them)" and everything human seems to glitter "fever-bright." She calls it "the thrill of waking up / out of a stagnant life." It is as though a spell is cast on her lovers: either they are "dead of wounds" or are "blown to pieces" Blind with tears of rage, the poet records it all in her poetry, determined to bear it all, but declaring that there is "no imagination to forestall woe" (Poems Selected 102-103).
In "The Suicide." Das's persona makes no pretence of being a successful wife, though she is thoroughly aware of the fact that this is exactly what the society wants her to do. She is expected to project the image of a happy woman and happy wife. Moreover, she is expected to keep the right distance between herself and the low and also between herself and the high. Through these lines she suggests, in a way, how meaningless and funny the concepts and categorizations such as "the high," "the low," the so called "right distance" between one category and the other are just as the images of "happy woman" and "happy wife" are nothing other than putting on poses and pretences. She makes a blatant statement assessing her own performance of her role:

O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead, just dead (28)

She even admits that she has been a "big flop" (30). It is quite significant that marital bliss is absent in the poems written by both Das and Rich. Women who suffer in silence when they cannot realize fulfilment in life through their gender roles and feel helpless victimization in their lives figure in their poetry.

In Rich's poem "Living in Sin" the woman persona suffers in silence on realizing that the dust and grime of every day life is slowly settling on her romance. The way she reacts on being disillusioned about domestic bliss is sketched in a realistic manner by the poet. "Jeered by the minor demons," she keeps herself busy doing the household chores: she pulled back the sheets, made the bed, found a towel to dust the table-top and let the coffee-pot boil.
over on the stove; perhaps the last of these suggests an inkling of the protest
that she felt within. However, the poet states that "By evening she was back in
love again / though not so wholly but throughout the night / she woke
sometimes . . ." (6).

In "Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers" Rich’s protagonist Jennifer is a timid and docile
woman, the ‘mystique’ wife who is subjugated by "the wedding band that sits
heavily upon her hand." But the poem communicates the idea that even though
she was mastered by ordeals, she made the pattern of a pack of tigers in a
panel. This gives us a peep into her psyche which yearns for a life of
independence and freedom from the fear of man. The poet comments that even
after her death the ring that has ensured her subjugation will continue to
"adorn" her finger but "the tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing,
proud and unafraid" (4).

The way the husband is treated in the poetry of Rich and Das invites
comparison. The references we find in Das’s poetry to the husband are far from
complimentary. In place of adoration for the husband which is likely to be
expected of a typical Indian woman what we find in her lines is disillusionment
and disgust. Even as she embarks on the topic of marriage she gives expression
to the pangs of anguish experienced by the woman and levels charges against
the husband. In "Of Calcutta" the persona relates how she was sent away by
her parents to another city to be a relative’s wife,

    ... a hausfrau for his home, and
    A mother for his sons, yet another nodding
    Doll for his parlour, a walkie talkie one to
    warm his bed at night (Collected Poems 59)

The impression created by this poem about the husband is possibly that
he is almost inhuman in his harsh treatment of his bride humiliating her with accounts of his sexual exploits. of "greater / pleasures that had come his way, richer harvests of / Lust, gleaned from other fields," listening to which "the embers died" within her. The influence his words have on the woman persona is one of bewilderment at the concept of human love which leads her to a sense of futility: "In silence I lay at night and / Thought of human love" ("Of Calcutta"). She is his "caged bird" and what is more, he has turned her into "a bird of stone" for he is reluctant to take her for a living being in flesh and blood.

You turn me into a bird of stone,
a granite dove
You build round me a shabby drawing room
and stroke my face absent mindedly while you read.
With loud talk
You bruise my pre-morning sleep,
You stick a finger into my dreaming eye. ("The Stone Age" 97)

The images of the husband conveyed by Rich through her poem "Rift" are equally vivid. Here she describes how his face is "turned awkwardly from the kiss of greeting" and how the curling of his lip suggests his displeasure which she takes to be a sign of closure, the "fending-off," the "clouding over." She makes it clear that there is indeed a wide gap of communication between the couple on such occasions of discord. His scorn turns up the jet of her anger and she finds him "overweening, obsessed," and even in his genius "narrow-minded" (A Wild Patience 49). It is again the lack of communication that looms large in Rich's poem "A Marriage in the 'Sixties":

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 (15)

Rich's woman persona protests against the curtailment of freedom in the following lines in "On Edges":

You built a glassy floor
that held me
as I leaned to fish for old
hooks and toothed tin cans (35)

In "Cat in the Gutter" Das gives expression to a woman's perception of man: "He was yesterday's old rag, today thrown / On the garbage heap, for such who would care?" (Only the Soul 103). Rich's persona in "August" entertains no better opinion of the male persona. She finds him revolting since "his mind is too simple" and she resolves not to go on "sharing his nightmares" (Poems Selected 211).

Both the poets under discussion seem to be so desperate regarding the condition of the life of women in patriarchal bonds that they speculate even about the freedom available in mental hospitals and prisons. "... I envy / the people in mental hospitals their freedom" states the daughter-in-law in Rich's poem "Mother-in-Law" (A Wild Patience 31). A somewhat similar statement is made by Das's persona in "Terror": "We recollect the ones / in jail and envy them their freedom ..." (Only the Soul 41).

In "I Shall Some Day", a poem addressed to the husband, Das's persona, a married woman who is rebellious and reluctant to be submissive expresses her ambivalence. In this poem she declares her decision to leave some day the cocoon he built around her with morning tea, love-words flung from doorways and most important of all, his "tired lust." The inadequacy of man-woman
relationship is experienced by both Rich and Das whose poetry depicts incompatible couples. Rich writes in "Trying to Talk with a Man"

Out here I feel more helpless
with you than without you

we talk of people caring for each other
in emergencies . . .

but you look at me like an emergency  (49)

Das's persona makes a candid confession about failure in marriage in "Larger Than Life Was He." "It was never a husband and wife bond / We were such a mismated pair." She goes on to admit that they were quits at every game they played and that if she were given "half a chance", she could easily "have been Sita to his Rama" but it was not to be. Like a bank locker, he was "steely cold and shut / or a filing cabinet that / only its owner could unlock." She states that not even for a moment did she own him. "Only a few bedbound chores / executed well, tethered him to me" (112).

A relationship rooted in sex alone, devoid of love cannot be enduring. This seems to be the message communicated by Rich through her poem "The Demon Lover." We are told that in a world of violence and war, tenderness of touch is just futile. Sex will not matter any longer here. The idea of the marriage of "two creatures sprung free / from cast-iron covenants" which might have taken place but which never did is brought in here. The suggestion seems to be that such an ideal marriage can only be utopian, what actually happens in this world is not a marriage of true minds . "Instead our hands and minds / erotically waver . . . / lightness is unavailing" (32).

The same idea is expressed by Das in "The Freaks." While the minds are
bent on racing towards love, what they attain in real life is something far short of it. The minds "only wander, tripping idly over / puddles of desire" (42). Absolute bliss seems to be something beyond the reach of mortals according to Das as her poem "Mortal Love" suggests. What the mortals can achieve at best is the "vacant ecstasy" that is intrinsic in "the Dance of the Eunuchs." Even though in the eunuchs' dance wide skirts go round in circles, cymbals clash richly and anklets keep on jingling, with "Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing" accompanied by songs with melancholic themes such as "lovers dying and of children left unborn. . ." it does not attain anything beyond "vacant ecstasy" (60).

Das's persona in "Composition," on realizing that it is futile to expect fulfilment in marriage states in a mood of resignation that she no longer needs love and that she is most content with tenderness. She has learnt that friendship cannot endure and that blood-ties are not sufficient to impart satisfaction. So her well-thought out course of action is to "whip up a froth of desire" with "every interesting man" she meets (78-79).

Rich's woman persona in "Rift" is frank enough to admit her own fault for the failure of marriage : "... and absolute loyalty was never in my line / once having left it in my father's house. . ." (A Wild Patience 49). Similarly the protagonist in "Perennial Answer" makes an open confession when she recollects her doings as a girl-bride: "And I was cruel, a girl-bride seeing only / Her marriage as a room so strange and lonely / She looked outside for warmth. . ." (Poems Selected 35).

The accounts of extra-marital relationships in Das's poems have shocked the conservative sensibility of many an Indian reader. In "The Stone Age" she relates how she drives her blue battered car along the bluer sea when her
husband leaves home and runs up the forty noisy steps "to knock at another's door" (97). She refers to him as "a lion," "a libertine" and he figures in a number of poems and prose-pieces written by her. In "My Grandmother's House" the persona confesses that she has lost her way and beg(s) now at strangers' doors / to receive love, at least in small change" (21). In "Substitutes" we see how "love" has been utterly devoid of any value and degenerates into the physical realm; the lovers become a series of substitutes who come and go through 'love,' the swivel door.

In "Glass" Das relates the experience of a woman who went to visit her lover for half an hour as "pure woman." With a lover's haste, he drew her to him and she was reduced to "an armful of splinters." She reflects that it was natural for fragile glass which is brittle to break and crumble but the shards are capable of hurting too. She no longer cares whom she hurts with love and often, without it. "With a cheap toy's / indifference I enter other's lives and make of / every trap of lust a temporary home." This poem is significant because the poet provides an explanation for the irrational behaviour -- the indifference of the cheap toy -- evinced by her personae in these poems. Her real problem is the problematic relationship she had with her father: "...I have misplaced a father / somewhere.../ and I look for him now everywhere" (103).

In "My Father's Death" Das writes: "There was a cloud of tension / Between him and me. I brought him / Shame, they say" (Only the Soul 116). Das professes through her poems that she has little faith in the institution of marriage. Her advice to husbands and wives in "Composition" is to obey each other's crazy commands and ignore the sane and to turn their home into a merry dog-house for, she says, this is what marriage is meant to be, "being arranged in/ most humorous heaven" (82). In the same poem she goes on to describe the experience
of falling in love as one of flinging oneself on the man "Like a moth on a flame" (83). In "Gino" she refers to the physical body of the woman as "this body that I wear without joy," "slender toy owned / by man of substance" which will wither, "battling with his / impersonal lust" (57). The woman persona who seeks love finds in man "the hungry haste of rivers" and in herself "the ocean's tireless waiting" ("An Introduction" 13).

It is, however, significant that this poet who is celebrated as a poet of love is very cautious about the use of the term "love" in her poetry. In her poem "In Love" she speaks about "the skin-communicated thing that I dare not yet in his presence call our love"; in the same poem she refers to "the sad lie of my unending lust": in "Convicts" there is a reference to "lusts like multi-coloured flags"; in "The Freaks" we get "skin's lazy hungers" and also "a grand flamboyant lust"; in "A Phone Call in the Morning" she calls it "the hunger"; in "The Maggots" there is a reference to "maggots' nipping the corpse"; in "The Millionaires at Marine Drive" it is "warmth" and "fire"; in "The Seashore" she refers to it as "this great, all enveloping thing I offer you"; in "Convicts" the reference is to "a burning in our veins." The awareness that love is not easy to attain makes her persona say that she would be "most content" with "tenderness" ("Composition"); in the same poem we get a reference to "whip(ping) up a froth of desire "most deliberately with every interesting man she meets. Das appears to be guarded against the over-use of the term "love" which her sensitive nature seems to cherish so much so that she would not like it to be profaned. In this respect she comes close to Kalidasa in Indian literature, who by virtue of his "discretion bordering on reticence does not use the word 'love' even once in Sakuntala," a masterpiece of human love (Joshi 49, 52); instead, he uses synonyms like "passion," "attachment," "desire," "solicitation," "sensual attraction".
"sensuality," "Cupid," "Eros," "expression of eyes," "emotion," "compassion," "fond affection," "intimate attention" and "companionship." As critics have suggested, according to the ancient Indian approach, love was "a hard-earned harmony of man-woman relationship and this explains the niggardly nature in the use of the word 'love' by Kalidasa" (Joshi 58).

References in the literary works of Das to her childhood experiences lead us to surmise that she who cherished love more than anything else, was denied parental love. Though she was brought up in the lap of luxury, her childhood was not one of unmixed joy. This was probably because of the reticent nature of her parents, who, she refers to as a "horribly mismated" pair (My Story 4). There was something that suggested that her parents were disappointed in her -- or, so it seemed to the young girl. She was not sure whether it was her swarthy complexion or her being a girl that made her disagreeable to them. The child who was apparently sensitive as her poem "Punishment In Kindergarten" suggests seems to have been yearning for love, looking for someone to confide in even among ghosts (My Story 10). She felt unhappy and desolate with the harsh treatment meted out to her by her parents, particularly her father. The scar left in her mind was something that would not heal so easily.

The way they married her off when she was barely sixteen seemed to her like a device to be rid of her. The poet says that later when he visited her and her husband for the first time her father seemed to "feel bad to see her so weak and emaciated" ("I Needed" 161). Das records her ambivalent relationship with her father in her poems. In "My Father's Death" she describes that on each short visit her father brought her "some banana chips / And harsh words of reproach, I feared / My father" (116). In another poem "Next to Indira Gandhi"
she states that "Next to Indira Gandhi my father I feared the most" *(Only the Soul* 118). The first and foremost reason she gives is that he was the one who told her when she was five years old that dark children should only wear white. She seems to have been affected with the words which must have haunted her. She was worried whether her father for whom she had great respect ever wanted a daughter and that, a dark-complexioned one too! He chose for her not only her clothes but also her tutors, hobbies, friends and "at fifteen with (her) first saree (he) picked (her) a husband" too. A life of suburban dullness was not her cup of tea at fifteen. And she felt justified in letting him down through her unconventional writings. But she believes that they are quits at present: he is dead, and she "feel(s) dead. More dead than (him)" (118).

Rich's relationship with her father was one of ambivalence too. Rich has narrated in *What Is Found There*, her prose meditations, how her Jewish father, Arnold Rich, a professor of pathology at Johns Hopkins, influenced her as a person and a writer even from her early childhood. But as she grew up, her love of independence compelled her to shake herself free of his influence. She chose a life of her own and married the man of her choice against her father's wishes. With her marriage there was almost a total break in her relationship with her parents. Even when there was a final reconciliation, the original bond between father and daughter could not be restored. Rich wanted her father to cherish and approve of her, not as he had when she was a child but as the woman she was. But her father demanded nothing short of "absolute loyalty, absolute submission to his will." This was not to be. Rich considered him ever after as the symbol of patriarchy ("Split at the Root" 234).

In "After Dark" a poem addressed to her father the poet says that his words "I know you better / than you know yourself" resound in her ears every
now and then like recorded music coming from a phonograph. She refers to him as "old tree of life" and "old man whose death (she) wanted." Torn at the roots, she limped away, self-maimed, had a new life of her own and stopped singing for a whole year. Then one morning she woke up to find his mene tekel fading on the wall and all of a sudden "knew myself your daughter." The poem "After Dark" is written in two parts and the second part is one of reconciliation. The first line here is only slightly different from Lear's words to his faithful daughter Cordelia, captured and near death. "Come, let's away to prison" (Shakespeare, King Lear 5.3.8):

Now let's away from prison-

I used to huddle in the grave
I'd dug for you and bite
my tongue for fear it would babble
-- Darling -- (25).

It is indeed remarkable that both the women poets who are mothers have little to say extolling motherhood. Rich has made it clear that she is quite aware of the burden of responsibility that is heaped on a woman in her capacity as a mother. In the present set up bringing up a child is an arduous task since motherhood imposes innumerable demands on woman which cannot be met easily. In spite of the father-figure being preponderant in the Freudian model, strangely enough, it is the mother who is always held responsible if there is some fault, and the mother feels guilty as the purveyor of evil. Rich attributes it to "something built in with the system" ("Three Conversations" 107). However, she maintains a positive attitude to children. In fact she considers it the only significant outcome of heterosexual relationship, as she suggests in her poem.
"For Ethel Rosenberg". Referring to Rosenberg in her capacity as wife and mother, Rich writes: "Like so many / who seemed to get nothing out of any of it / except her children" (96).

Das too makes it explicit that she cherishes her children, the young ones who have been moulded in her womb even though she does not seem to have much regard for the husband:

Love is not important, that
makes the blood carouse
nor the man who brands you
with his lust...

Only that matters which forms
as toadstools do
under lightning and rain
for, only the treasures matter
that were washed ashore
not the long, blue tides that washed them in ("Jaisurya" 62--63)

However it is not pure and unmixed joy that both these poets derive from motherhood as their poetry indicates. Das makes a generalized statement that "Each mother suckles her own enemy" in "Daughter of the Century" (140). She observes in "My Father's Death" that "Children are sculptures that soon forget their sculptor" (124--25). Referring to the dual role she had to play as a worker and as a mother, Rich states: "I was a worker and a mother, / that means a worker and a worker" ("One Life" Time's Power 43). The only way in which she differentiates the life of a mother from that of a worker is that for the former
one does not "pay union dues / or get a pension"; she calls it "more than half a life." Rich's persona does not even indicate any trace of fulfilment in living the life of a mother.

The same can be said about Rich's women personae in "From an Old House", the ones who first came and settled in America. Those women, who were "washed up on the continent to be 'fruitful.'" had to exhaust all their energy doing strenuous work. In Rich's poem they figure as "faceless torsos licked by fire." But Rich has portrayed them as women who were not ensnared by the idea of "the mystique of motherhood." The American woman of the past in Rich's "Old House" is fully aware of the fact that the sons she would bear would ride away to the wilderness and that her daughters would meet with a destiny similar to her own: "whose juices drain like mine / into the arroyo of stillbirths, massacres / Hanged as witches, sold as breeding wenches" (66).

Das, too, is not oblivious of the fact that motherhood, with its myriad demands is sure to bring in its train dejection and even loss of identity at some stage or other. In "Middle Age" and "Death of the Goat" she describes such an unhappy phase in the life of a woman when children become quite insensitive and harsh, as they pass into adulthood. Middle age is the time when one's children are no longer friends but critics, "severe with their tongue." When they "burst their cocoons" like pupae and emerge in "harsh adult glory" it appears as if they no longer need their mother except for "serving tea" and for "pressing clothes" (qtd. in Prasad 124).

Das gives expression to the actual experience of a woman in labour in "Jaisurya" and in "Afterwards." In "Afterwards" through just a few deft strokes she manages to picture the incident:

... just a while ago
Your mother groaned in labour pain
And slept; and then your first cry rose
To stun the silence of her dreams (5).

In "Jaisurya" on the other hand she deals at length with the experience of childbirth. It should be remembered that in a cultural context in which an open reference to childbirth is still considered improper, a poem on the theme of childbirth calls for considerable boldness. But she establishes a connection between the drizzle in outside nature and the first labour pain which is extended to the association between woman in labour and the earth. She portrays how the baby makes its appearance like "a streak of light thrust / into the fading light," "wailing into the light," when the rain ceased (63).

Rich has written about her own experience of motherhood in her personal life in the Jewish cultural context. She had three sons before she was thirty and she felt that to be a Jewish mother was to be perceived in the Jewish family as "an entirely physical being, a producer and nourisher of children." The experience of motherhood was to radicalize her eventually. As she experienced it in a Jewish cultural situation, her immediate reaction was feeling "rebellious, moody and defensive." Soon she realized that it was not in the Jewish cultural context alone that women found their role as mothers exacting, but in the entire American middle class society mothers were "restless" and "half-stunned" ("Split at the Root"235).

Feminist poets are particularly interested in projecting the images of victimized women in patriarchal society. The formative influence of suffering in shaping the temperament of woman in patriarchy is remarkable. The concept of suffering is a possible connecting link between women of all ages since it may be viewed as something similar to cultural heritage among women. It is
exactly this idea that Rich conveys through the following lines, depicting suffering as her legacy as a woman: "... The woman who cherished / her suffering is dead. I am her descendant. / I love the scar-tissue she handed on to me. . ." ("Twenty-One Love Poems" VIII: 81).

Rich's Jewish consciousness engendered in her a vision of the persecuted minority even from her early years. In spite of the fact that her father was an "assimilated" Jew and her mother a gentile, she found it difficult to view herself as one different from the Jews. As she puts it in a poem she felt as if she were "twice an outsider" by virtue of being a Jewish woman. She has no difficulty whatever in identifying herself with the oppressed and marginalized sections of people.

According to Rich the life of a woman in a patriarchal society is subject to persecution in two different ways: first, as a person who has imbibed the culture of the society in which she has been nurtured she becomes her own enemy when she finds that her own dreams and aspirations are in direct conflict with what she has considered to be the proper, accepted norms of society. This is what she communicates through "Snapshots": "A thinking woman sleeps with monsters / The beak that grips her, she becomes" (9). In section 2 of the poem, too, she gives a detailed picture of the inner conflict experienced by a woman who is going through a similar situation. The second type of persecution is what the society and its various establishments inflict on woman because of her femaleness.

In a number of poems written by Rich and Das there are pictures of innocent women who are victimized by male-dominated society. In "Frame" Rich sketches the victimization of a young, coloured girl, an undergraduate student who seeks shelter from the sleet and the "wind-raked curb" in a newly constructed building.
This is resented by the watchman who is white who fetches a policeman, also white, and the girl is subjected to the anger of these white males; she is handcuffed and dragged down the stairs into the police car. Even if she is perceived as a breaker of rules, which she is not, the punitive measures taken by the policeman cannot be justified since they have sexual overtones. He "twists the flesh of her thigh with his nails." And he seems to derive masochistic pleasure from the physical assault. Later she is thrown into the cell, charged with "trespass, assault and battery" (A Wild Patience 48).

In a male-dominant society, such measures taken against women are quite possible. As Rich reflects elsewhere, "for being / dark skinned, female, poor," one can be sent to jail ("North American Time" 117). Clearly it is by way of her femaleness and her racial factor that the girl in "Frame" is ill-treated by the men. She is "twice an outsider" to the law, and the policeman, the custodian of law, finds nothing unusual or improper about treating her in this manner.

Usually it is the socially backward and "unliberated" women who are subjected to physical violence and torture by men (Rich,"Anti-Feminist" 103). It is the picture of such bestial torture inflicted on a woman and the way she is murdered that we get in the following lines by Rich:

I don't want to hear how he beat her after the earthquake,
tore up her writing, threw the kerosene
lantern into her face waiting
like an unbearable mirror of his own. I don't
want to hear how she finally ran from the trailer
how he tore the keys from her hands, jumped into the truck
and backed it into her. I don't want to think
how her guesses betrayed her -- that he meant well, that she
was really the stronger and ought not to leave him
to his own apparent devastation. ("An Atlas" 143)

Rich has discussed at length the male perception of woman as the "other"
in a system of values which distrusts and degrades woman. In his view woman
is nothing more than a "being toward whom man often feels fear, guilt and
hostility" and he weaves his least defensible theories" about her ("Anti-Feminist
" 103)

Rich commemorates the lives of women who sailed to Palestine in the first
decades of the twentieth century, mostly from Russia and Eastern Europe, in
her poem "Sources" XIX. It was their hope that in Palestine their suffering
would come to an end that motivated those pioneers to undertake such a
hazardous journey, leaving everything behind. Her imagination conjures up
groups of Jewish children among whom there are gifted ones and orphaned
ones, young serious nurses and "part of a family wearing white head-bandages"
who were "beaten in a pogrom."

In "North American Time" Rich recounts the names of heroic women who
distinguished themselves in different walks of life but were met with tragic
ends since they were either executed or exiled.

Poet, sister : words --
whether we like it or not --
stand in a time of their own.
No use protesting I wrote that
before Kollontai was exiled
Rosa Luxemburg . . .
Anna Mae Aquash, murdered,
before Treblinka, Birkenau,
Hiroshima, before Sharpeville,

........................................
-- those faces, names of places
sheared from the almanac

of North American time (116 - 17)

This poetic technique of enumeration employed here by Rich is reminiscent of Yeats' use of it in "Easter 1916" where he repeats name upon name of Irish heroes who became martyrs fighting for the freedom of Ireland. Rich names in this poem persons such as Alexandra Kollontai, an important Soviet government official who fell in disfavour with the government for her advocacy of women's issues and under Stalin was exiled to Siberia; Rosa Luxemberg, Marxist revolutionary and a founder of the German Communist Party who was imprisoned through much of the First World War for her criticism of the War and was killed during an anti-government uprising and Anna Mae Aquash, activist in the American Indian Movement who was shot to death by an unidentified assailant. ("North American Time" 116). Rich has written a poem "For Ethel Rosenberg" to commemorate "the extremest victim / described nonetheless as 'rigid of will.'" She was convicted along with her husband, of conspiracy to commit espionage and was electrocuted on June 19, 1953. Rich was touched by the execution of Rosenberg to such an extent that she says: "She sank however into my soul. A weight of sadness / I hardly can register how deep / Her memory has sunk..." (96).

Among the victimized women portrayed by Rich there are women who are frustrated but dare not express their feelings, and those who are morally indignant but are trained to repress their feelings. There are women who experience the conflict between the image of the "feminine mystique" and their
own personal aspirations, women who have imbibed the culture of society which makes them their own enemies. Some are women who suffer from fatigue and impotent rage against the system they have to put up with and fear that they are going mad. There are also gifted women who have to put up with the never-ending chores of life regretting what they might have been if only opportunities had not been denied to them. The victimized women also comprise those who are endowed with qualities of the mind and spirit but are excluded from public life.

There are poems by Das, too, about victimized women. In "Honour" she depicts the precarious nature of the lives of young women who belonged to the class of serfs in the feudal set up. It was the practice in those days to present the young girls for the sexual exploits of the landlords. The lives of those "toys" were held with little regard. When they were found to be pregnant, they would be mercilessly killed and thrown into wells and ponds. The powerful landlords would always manage to get away unscathed from the clutches of law, somehow or other.

In "Honour" Das brings in the incident of the young husband being charged with the murder of his beautiful bride. The poet says that even though the body was rotting, still "the wench was alluring." They took only one short look at the young girl: "Cover her with a cloth, we told the police, honour, honour, / Honour, the dearest word of all in the Nayar dictionary" (139).

In "Nani" Das portrays a pregnant maid who committed suicide. She was found hanging in the privy. The incident is narrated through the perspective of a child. A year or two after the incident, when the child asks her grandmother about Nani, the woman pretends as if she never knew such a person. Shifting the reading glasses on her nose in confusion and unease the grandmother...
responded, "Nani? who is she." And "with that question ended Nani." The poet reflects that those who ask questions and move on before the answers come are "the wise ones" (19). As Satchidanandan observes, the poem "turns out to be an indictment of the amnesiac aristocracy that can ruin a poor woman's honour, force her to end her life and within days sentence her to the second death of oblivion" (85).

Among the victimized women who figure in Das's poetry, there are women who have been subjugated by men, those who have invariably been subjected to sexual harrassment and violence. Among such victimized women there are beautiful young women who have to pay for their good looks with their lives since the rich men ravished by their beauty exploit them sexually and later strangle them and throw their bodies into wells and ponds ("Honour"). There are women who, like corpses, let themselves be nipped by the maggots of lovers ("The Maggots") and the "yielders" who yield themselves to everything ("The Descendants"). There are also women who, without joy, "wear the body," which is slender toy owned by "man of substance" and those like the woman who experiences "the loneliness of a double bed" since she knows that her mate lies "dreaming of another mate / a woman perhaps lustier than his own" ("Anamalai" VI, 156). Those who project the semblance of women with "unending lust" but are full of despair and desolation since spiritual joy evades them can also be brought under the category of victimized women characters in the poetry of Das.

Through her poems Das brings out the hollowness of the oft-preached values of the patriarchal society. She makes it quite clear that she cannot agree with the values of a society that keeps up appearances but is devoid of moral qualities and shows no concern for the oppressed sections of society. She
is even disgusted with the fact that she is "born out of that uneasy soil, nourished / By sweat, semen, blood, the juices of the placenta and the / Strangled babe" ("Honour" 138). She can see through the manipulations of male-dominated society which would adopt any means and go to any extent in order to reach its ends.

Rich's observation that much of women's poetry has been of the nature of "the blues song" is quite relevant in this context. She expounds it as a cry of pain, of victimization or a lyric of seduction. She draws our attention to the fact that in contemporary literature a perceptible change has come to occur; in place of the melancholic strain, one can see in women's writing, "pervasive anger." Rich holds the view that both victimization and anger are real and part of women's experience and instead of making any attempt to conceal them women should make a conscious effort to tap them and explore them in creative writing ("WWDA" 98).

According to Rich the defining experience of the woman writer is not her inner struggle with patriarchal culture, but "her consciousness of solidarity of an identity shared with other women" ("WWDA" 98). Rich celebrates the writers of the past and political activists who led the women's movement in the past. Women like Stanton, Anthony, Addams and Dickinson are "resurrected" in some of her poems. She quotes Dickinson's words, "My life had stood a loaded gun" and writes how that great poet was "iron-eyed, and beaked and purposed as a bird" ("Snapshots" 10). She also suggests that Dickinson managed to find time for literary pursuit even in the midst of household chores:

Reading while waiting
for the iron to heat,
writing...
in that Amherst pantry while the jellies
boil and scum (10)

In an essay written in 1975, Rich has asserted her conviction that Dickinson was quite a practical woman who exercised her poetic gift, making choices as she had to. Rich has totally dismissed the possibility suggested by Dickinson's contemporary Thomas Higginson about her being "partially cracked." She would like to recuperate the image of Dickinson as a person of "powerful will, not at all frail or breathless, someone whose personal dimensions would be felt in a household": Rich has added that Dickinson herself baked the bread, made jellies and gingerbread, nursed her mother through a long illness, was a skilled horticulturist... in her New England greenhouse" ("Vesuvius at Home" 179, 80). Being a woman of genius meant paying the price of isolation for Dickinson as Ostriker states (Writing 112) and this brought in its train non-conformity and also the idea of eccentricity. Wollstonecraft who sketched out the feminist movement in England in her work Vindication of the Rights of Woman is yet another prominent figure in Rich's gallery of brave women. She was a heroic soul who fought for the rights of women. But all she gained for her daring efforts was being labelled "harpy, shrew and whore" ("Snapshots" 11).

Rich laments the lot of women who are misrepresented and underestimated everywhere, in literature and in life. It is a male-dominated universe where female subjugation is the harsh reality which is depicted in "Snapshots." It is the fault of society and not of women, that they are underlings. Patriarchal society has always been willing to recognize mere talent in women--"glitter in fragments and rough drafts" (12). Women hear their "mediocrities over-praised." They know that every lapse on their part would be forgiven. But society would not be prepared to forgive women in the least, if they dare to "cast too bold a
shadow / or smash the mould straight off" (12). It will be considered a "grave crime" which will be punished severely and ruthlessly by the custodians of social norms and practices.

In the process of validating women's experience, Rich is engaged in a complex construction of womanhood in all its diversity. It has been the endeavour of Rich and also other feminists like Audre Lorde and Judy Grahn to construct a literary tradition for women. They want to unearth and present before the world a buried but still persisting female culture which stretches back to pre-patriarchal civilization. Seeking the aid of mythology, they endeavour to create a world of female experience where women's power and knowledge constitute the norm. In Of Woman Born Rich brings in theories about the existence of matriarchies where Goddess-worshipping prevailed before the introduction of the patriarchal ethos. As part of the feminist attempt to re-create a female culture the feminist poets employ devices like reference, allusion and occasional descriptions of the buried culture. Documenting the silence of women is important in such a project since the "invisible" and "buried" women communities of the past emerge into visibility as their "non-existence" is made known. It is in this light that Rich's sequence of poems "Turning the Wheel" should be approached.

In "Turning the Wheel" the poet conjures up the vanished culture of the Hohokan Indians. In her attempt to pierce through the past to a prehistoric culture and imagine the lives that were lived, all that she succeeds in imagining is "a faceless woman grinding corn" (A Wild Patience 52). She tries to imagine a desert-shamaness bringing water to fields of corn; but the desert is half-eroded and half-flooded with innumerable jets of spray which makes the work of the shamaness needless and a total waste. The poet reflects, "the shamaness
could well have withdrawn her ghost" (54). In "Self-hatred" she calls upon unborn
sisters to "see us not one-dimensional but with / the past as your steadying and
corrective lens" (55). In "Particularity" her advice to the readers is to forget the
archetypes in the search of the desert witch and thus avoid reducing her to a
symbol. She is kept helpless and conventional and her true power is routed
backward into the past if she merely symbolizes power and is "barred from
participation by those who need her" (56). Archetypal images of women from
the vanished world of the Hohokan Indians, which are as varied as one wearing
jasper, sardonyx and agate on her fingers and shawls woven in fire and blood,
and another, wrist-deep in mud and shawled in dust and wholly anonymous,
are projected in "Apparition." She suggests that when one takes a close look at
one or the other of these images, one cannot but feel that there is something
familiar about "those cheekbones / or those eye-sockets; or that still-bristling
hair" (57).

A reading of Rich's poem "Burden Baskets" will make it clear that her
intention in composing the poem is to bridge the gap between the past and the
present; moreover the poem has succeeded in introducing 'snapshots' from the
lives of women who belong to polemically alien cultures, as those described in
the following lines:

But, behind glass, these baskets
woven for the young women's puberty dances
still performed among the still surviving
Apache people; filled with offerings (A Wild Patience 53)

However a list of the offerings will summon us to the present world that is
familiar to us from the world of the past which is vague, and alien with its
strange rituals and practices: "cans of diet Pepsi, peanut brittle, / Cracker
Jack. Hershey bars / piled there, behind glass . . . "(15-17). An awareness of the community of women and the specific nature of female experience is communicated through portraying the lives of women in this manner. Rich has used the same strategy of imaginative re-construction of women communities in "Culture and Anarchy" too. There she introduces a quotation from a letter Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote to Susan B. Anthony:

I should miss you more than any other
living being from this earth . . .

Yes, our work is one,
we are one in aim and sympathy

and we should be together (A Wild Patience 15)

The poet has deliberately introduced this passage into the texture of the poem to suggest the analogy of the relationship between the two Victorian friends and the one between her lesbian lover and herself (Montefiore 88). The lines further indicate the surprising similarities in the experience of women of different times who belong to diverse cultures.

Most of the younger generation of Indian women poets have gathered the courage to "write female" from the bold way of writing adopted by Das. According to some critics, "these women poets and perhaps, women poets anywhere, inhabit the same woman's world" (Bhattacharya 161). In this context it is relevant to remember that Montefiore has cautioned us against the myth of a "timeless female world." Still in the midst of those obvious differences in lifestyles and cultures, we should not be blind to the surprisingly identical attitudes and responses among women writers. There will be similarities in the perspectives, attitudes and visions of women reflected in their writings in spite of the
well-marked differences in their lives. It is not biological features that contribute to such similarities in women's writing but the fact that they constitute "the literature of the colonized" as has been accurately observed by Christiane Rochefort (qtd. in Showalter 259).