Conclusion

The poetry of Adrienne Rich presents a clear-sighted example of a poet whose work begun in a formal self-regarding manner devoid of politics: but a poet who has gone on, by virtue of attention to experience, to establish a major voice in forms clearly political. Her poetry attained maturity when she started realizing that politics was not something “out there” but something “in here” and the essence of her condition. Terrence Des Pres writes that, “thinking through the body is the bedrock of moral intelligence of much of feminist writing. a way of judging the world in direct relation to physical need and physical vulnerability, including the vulnerability of childbirth and nurturing generally.” Rich wants women to view their physicality as a “resource” rather than a destiny."

In “Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity” Rich writes that, “The experience of motherhood was eventually to radicalize me.” Part of that radicalizing process involved Rich’s relationship to both poetry and history. In 1956 she started dating her poems by year, which marks her clear political stand:

I did it because I was finished with the idea of poem as a single. encapsulated event, a work of art complete in itself; I knew my life was changing, my work was changing and I needed to indicate to readers my sense of being engaged in a long continuous process. This act of dating her poems was a rejection of new critical values that placed the poem outside of its cultural and historical contexts. In Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law. where Rich began dating her poems for the first time, the voice of the poet is personal and female, a technique she
deliberately adopted in an attempt to move away from the constrictions of formalism and experiment with poetic form in order to find ways to express the fragmentation and confusion she faced as a woman living in American culture in the 1960s. Albert Gelpi writes, "The verbal and metaphorical compression and the formal symmetry of the poems from the fifties had given way in the sixties to an unmetered, unrhymed line and an open form which allowed for a searching of her experience on psychological and political terms." Poems in Snapshots capture images of women, known and unknown, located within an oppressive cultural space that denies them full subjectivity.

According to Charles Altieri, Adrienne Rich's political poetry should be read in two ways: as an exploration of the life of women in contemporary culture and as an exploration of general human concerns for identity and community. Her themes revolve around two poles: the power and potential of language to determine consciousness and our lived reality, and the importance of personal experience and reflection in the creation of social community. Her writing assumes that in understanding ourselves through the past and through the language we share about that past we can try to break free of the powerful, oppressive, and misguided cultural constructs that have such power over us. Language devoid of personal experience brings deception and the space for abusive power, blockades to the politics to which Rich's poetry is committed. For Rich, vision must have an affinity for action. To a great extent, all poets are concerned with transformation. In the very making of a poem a transformation is involved from perceived reality or experience into a verbal utterance shaped by the poet's imagination and craft. But for Adrienne Rich transformation goes beyond the act of writing: it spreads to the culture at large through the
poem's ability to question and challenge the given assumptions and offer new visions.

Adrienne Rich works hard to liberate women from patriarchal oppression. Her poetic discourse, in a broader sense, serves as a critique of the cultural representation of the feminine body. "The women's body, with its potential for gestating, bringing forth and nourishing new life, has been through the ages a field of contradictions: a space invested with power, and an acute vulnerability; a numinous figure and the incarnation of evil: a hoard of ambivalences, most of which have worked to disqualify women from the collective act of defining culture." In Rich's political metaphor, "patriarchal culture... has literally colonized the bodies of women." In challenging patriarchy's "colonizing" of the feminine body, Rich forms new discourses of sexuality that reclaim women's power to reshape their psychic, social, and cultural lives.

With this awareness of the feminine body, Rich labours to empower it both as subject and semiotic force in her poetry. And it is here that her poetics parallels the *écriture feminine* of French theorists Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva. Like Cixous's dissemination of women's "cosmic" desire that overthrows the tyranny of masculine sexuality, centred in the phallus and encoding the body through the domination of its political anatomy, Rich's "Re-forming the Crystal" presents the same dispersal of erotic desire. Rich's feminist philosophy finally leads to broader "testing-grounds" of political change.

In contemporary feminism the concept of *difference* has a central position. Like Julia Kristeva and Mary Daly. Rich uses psychoanalysis and anthropology to show that a feminine subject is differently constituted from a masculine subject. The question of motherhood, in *Of Woman Born*, has
proved to be a remarkably productive topic for Rich since she considers that mothers, not just women, are the repressed subject in patriarchy. In *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, and later writings in *Signs* and elsewhere, Rich takes that relation between reproduction and sexuality into a more radical definition of difference. In presenting a sexuality different from men, Adrienne Rich has evolved complex arguments about the differences between women, as well as between women and men, and therefore is challenging many normative values even in contemporary feminism.

A sense of identity with other women moves Rich more than any other experience (after childbirth). In the 1974 edition of her *Selected Poems* she changed the pronouns of protagonists to women. She discusses several types of female groups, from the Cambridge women in *Of Woman Born* to the more theoretical examination of Elizabeth Stanton and Susan B. Anthony's relationship in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. Rich discusses these groups to prove that feminist culture must emerge from an alternative feminist intellectual tradition based on friendship: "To name and found a culture of our own means a real break from the passivity of the twentieth-century Western mind." The creation of woman's culture is the only necessary antidote to the passivity of isolation. Hoping that the community of women will supplant the violence of patriarchal society, Rich believes that women must explore their collective experience in order to transcend the isolation of their lives.

Rich's demand for a separate, female-identified physical and semantic space brings her close to the feminism of writers like Mary Daly or Luci Irigaray. Although Rich presents this space as primary to feminism, it is not necessarily an essential component. That is why Rich, unlike Daly, is prepared to examine in more detail the interrelationship between socialization and psychical patterns. And Rich's proposals for alternative
models of social institutions are her best contribution to that wider feminist critique.

In "Towards a Woman - Centered University" Rich presents her idea of a women's community:

If a truly universal and excellent-network of child care can begin to develop, if women in sufficient numbers pervade the university at all levels ... there is a strong chance that in our own time we would begin to see some true "University" of values emerging from the inadequate and distorted corpus of patriarchal knowledge.

Rich wants a society where women can experience their deepest needs and requirements for survival as sanity rather than insanity. A society where one is not required to apologize for whatever forms one wants for one's life – whether the traditional form of family, or homosexual, or something else. A society where one simply need not waste so much energy constructing a viable existence, where mere survival would not take such a toll. A society where one does not dictate the other. Men can also join in this community and save their own lives in the process. Rich writes in a review in *Ms*:

This new culture, created and defined by women, is the great phenomenon of our century. I believe that in any genuinely human retrospect it will loom above two world wars, and several socialist revolutions ... Women's art, though created in solitude, wells up out of community ... and, by its very existence, it strengthens the network of the community.
Rich reaches to the conclusion that what women need is the opportunity and the approval to name and describe the realities of their lives, as they have known them. For the expression of their truths women should listen to their inner selves. It is only through this expressing of the self, the speaking of women with other women, the telling of their secrets, the contrasting of wounds and the sharing of words that the patriarchal institutions can be challenged and changed. In fact, this listening and telling of women has been able to break many a silence and taboo: literally to transform forever the way they perceive, what they all, collectively, have experienced, as the daughters of women, as the mothers of children, is a tale of great importance: a tale only beginning to be told. Rich urges women to establish a close relationship with other women, and take the responsibility to express their experiences, to effort seriously to listen to each other, whether in private or in public. “In order to change what is, we need to give speech to what has been, to imagine together what might be.” In her poem “Sibling Mysteries” Rich beautifully shows how this work of listening and telling can be done by women:

Remind me how the stream
wetted the clay between our palms
and how the flame

licked it to mineral colors
how we traced our signs by torch light
in the deep chambers of the caves.11

An elaborate interweaving of assonance and consonance - especially the complex patterning of the e’s and l’s - emphasizes the bond shared by
two sisters with their mother, a bond that transcends their individual separateness: "our lives were driven down the same dark canal." Rich in this poem captures the themes of chthonic mysteries, the primordial origins of the family, the denial of female power, and the craving to return to the mother. Throughout the poem, the refrain "Remind me" has been used to recapture the prehistoric past. The poem is extremely rhythmic and lines move easily and gracefully yet controlled: "Remind me how we loved our mother's body/ our mouths drawing the first / thin sweetness from her nipples." The images are striking and resonant, appealing to sight and touch: "smelling the rains before they came / feeling the fullness of the moon/ before moon rise." In an intricate structure of sound and sense - "and how we drew quills / of porcupines between our teeth / to a keen thinness" – Rich recreates the world of women's primordial power, a world that Dickinson was also trying to revive.

There comes a point where Rich seems to become impatient with the speed with which things are happening when there is an urgency in each woman’s life that may be lost, washed away like dishwater, as history does not move fast enough for her.

Trying every key in the bunch to get the door even ajar
not knowing whether it is locked or simply jammed from long disuse
trying the keys over and over then throwing the bunch away
staring around for an axe
wondering if the world can be changed like this
if a life can be changed like this.

Her patience gives way and she searches for "an axe" to wield against an unyielding door. She cannot wait any longer to see changes happening by themselves. instead she will have to make them happen by crumbling down
the obstacles, the age old social systems, resisting the free flow of growth and happiness. She imagines of a new world in which women have their identities firmed in their bodies, are powerful, full of their own power, not the old patriarchal power-over but the power-to-create, power-to-think, power-to-express and concretize their visions and transform their lives and that of their children. This power will speak in them more and more as they repossess their bodies, including the discretion to mother or not to mother, and how, with whom, and when: for the fight of women to become self-determining is rooted in their bodies. She wants to destroy the institution of motherhood but not the experience of motherhood. Rather she wants to liberate the creation and nourishment of life into the same field of decision, tight, surprise, imagination and conscious intelligence, as an other difficult, but freely selected, work.

Rich imagines how it would feel to live in such a society. What would it imply to mother in a society where women were greatly valued and respected? What would it signify to bear and raise children in the fullness of power to care for them, furnish for them, in dignity and pride? What would it imply to mother in a society which had genuinely taken into consideration the issues of racism and hunger? What would it imply to mother in a society which was fully utilizing the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical faculties of women, in all their difference and diversity? would it imply to live and die in a culture which regarded both life and death, in which both the living world and the bodies of women were finally liberated from centuries of violation and domination. Rich calls this “the quantum leap” of the radical feminist vision. She advises women to handle this situation with courage and intelligence, firmly holding their feet on the ground where they presently are. “But nothing less than the most radical imagination will carry us beyond this place, beyond the mere struggle for survival, to that lucid
recognition of our possibilities which will keep us impatient, and unresigned to mere survival.”

Adrienne Rich’s vision of a woman whose powers are balanced between the self and the world around her, is quietly but poignantly presented in her poem “Transcendental Etude.” The woman driving alone on an August evening surprises a deer and her fawns and thinks about the fruitfulness of nature. Her “nerves singing the immense/fragility of all this sweetness, / this green world” that “persists stubbornly“. She thinks that a lifetime is not enough to understand it all. She realizes how unprepared we are for this study and Rich introduces the study of music as the metaphor for how we should progress: to start with the simplest exercises and slowly move to the difficult ones, “practicing till strength/ and accuracy become one with the daring / to leap into transcendence.” But rejecting the temptation to become virtuoso, “competing/ against the world for speed and brilliance,” we have to cut away the “old force” and “disenthral ourselves” because

the whole chorus throbbing at our ears
like midges. told us nothing, nothing
of origins. nothing we needed
to know. nothing that could re-member us.

After cutting away the dross there dawns a new realisation of unity “a whole new poetry beginning here.” The poem underlines the connections between past, present and future, nature, civilization, self and other. Here Rich emphasises the need of reverence toward life in its different forms, human and natural. The title of the poem, according to Wendy Martin, is double edged as Rich desires to be grounded in life, not released from it. For Rich, transcendence implies the dissolution of artificial
categories that hide the diversity of experience; moreover, transcendence also implies the possibility of living in harmony with nature, a promise to development, not destruction – life, not death. This knowledge and acceptance of the deep relation between nature and human life brings a vision that defeats the traditional separation of mind and body, self and other:

I am the lover and the loved.

home and the wanderer, she who splits

firewood and she who knocks, a stranger

in the storm.

The poem ends with a beautiful section where a woman is quietly transformed into a mythic figure as her composition becomes a hope for all mankind:

Vision begins to happen in such a life
as if a woman quietly walked away
from the argument and jargon in a room
and sitting down in the kitchen, began turning in her lap
bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps.
laying them out absently on the scrubbed boards
in the lamplight.

To this pattern, the woman adds “small rainbow – colored shells” “skeins of milkweed”, “the dark blue petal of the petunia” and other fragments from the natural and animal world:

Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity.
the striving for greatness, brilliance –
only with the musing of a mind
one with her body, experienced fingers quietly pushing
dark against bright, silk against roughness.
pulling the tenets of a life together
with no mere will to mastery,
only care for the many-lived, unending
forms in which she finds herself.
becoming now the shred of broken glass
slicing light in a corner, dangerous
to flesh, now the plentiful, soft leaf
that wrapped round the throbbing finger, soothes the wound:
and now the stone foundation, rockshelf further
forming underneath everything that grows.

Reuniting consciousness that has been fragmented by the patriarchal
hierarchical culture, this poem captures the fluidity, concurrence, variety
and diversity of experience instead of making one perception subservient to
another. The past is not rejected here; instead, it provides a platform for the
future. Like the "rockshelf" that works as the foundation for life in nature,
the past sustains present and future lives. In this image of the woman, Rich
captures her images of poetry, her concepts of language and form, her
feminine consciousness with visionary power.

The wide range of Adrienne Rich's work has merited extensive
critical attention and she has left a legacy to the feminist movement which
will be long lasting. Since the publication of *Diving into the Wreck*, critics
have considered Rich's poetry and prose as constituting a radical feminist
politics that has significantly contributed to women's desire in challenging a
dominant, male-oriental culture. Most of the critics agree on Rich's
technical skills - her powers of expression, rhetorical energy, penetration of
observation, and knowledge of poetic tradition – however, her clear political position has given rise to protest from critics who do not agree with her views. Some don’t approve the intimate bias in her poetry. others disparage what they see as a didactic tone in her work. Her politics and her visionary anger have sparked a heated debate about the place of ideology in poetry. Some critics think that the combination of ideology and traditional poetics has given Rich the scope for experimentation. as Cooper says, “the combination that has always produced the strongest literature.” Templeton evaluates that “Adrienne Rich’s poetry has always raised profound questions about the cultural uses of poetry. For over forty years her work has moved critics to comment on the nature of poetic art, its political significance, the character of poetic tradition, and the value of poetry as a cultural and political activity.”

Rich’s poetry appeals not only to women involved with the feminist movement but also to the general audiences. Margaret Atwood, in a New York Times review of Rich’s Diving into the Wreck, writes, “If Adrienne Rich were not a good poet, it would be easy to classify her as just another vocal Women’s Libber, substituting polemic for poetry, simplistic messages for complex meanings. But she is a good poet, and her book is not a manifesto, though it subsumes manifestos: nor is it a proclamation, though it makes proclamations.” Rich’s dealing of women’s issues has not restricted critical appreciation to women. Helen Vendler writes about Diving into the Wreck that Rich “forsakes distinctions between men and women. for the most part, and sees us all as crippled creatures, scarred by that process of socialization and nurture.” Charles Altieri finds that Rich’s voice incorporates a concern for identity and community that is not gender specific. Terrence Des Pres writes, “One doesn’t have to be a woman to see the decency of feminist concerns .... Being female is not in itself the
criterion for valuing Rich’s poems. Poet Ruthann Robson has recently written in her review of *Midnight Salvage*. “Looking back at Rich’s work, there were also always the voices of men—the men who were poets and resisters of fascism. Just as there has always been an unstinting political context into which the language of poetry intercedes.” As in earlier works Rich’s latest poetry is political, positing human desire in all its forms as resistance: to death, stagnation, oppression, and totalitarianism.
REFERENCES


7 ibid. p. 13.

8 ibid. pp. 154-55.


10 ibid. p. 260.


12 ibid. p. 51.

13 ibid. p. 48.

14 ibid. p. 47.


17 ibid. p. 273.

19 ibid. p. 265.
20 ibid, p. 266.
21 ibid, p. 267.
22 ibid. p. 268.
23 ibid. p. 268.
24 ibid. p. 268.
25 ibid. p. 268.
26 ibid. pp. 268-69
29 Margaret Atwood, "Review of *Diving into the Wreck*", in *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*. p. 280.