

# Adrienne Rich: Poet, Mother, Lesbian Feminist, Visionary

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In her poetry and her more recent prose work, Adrienne Rich has dealt with many of the issues central to feminism. It is impossible even in a paper devoted entirely to her thought to explore all the subjects which she tackles. I have chosen therefore to concentrate on her theory of mothering as exemplary of her thought and work. I will begin with a discussion of Rich's life and background, then discuss the themes of language and mothering and conclude with a presentation of her vision of the future. In the last section of the paper, I will review some of the criticisms which have been levelled against her work, counterposing these criticisms with Rich's own words, and offering my own critique of her thought and work.

## Adrienne Rich's Life

For all the poetry she has written and published, all the articles that have appeared in countless magazines from the *New York Review of Books* to *Sinister Wisdom*, we know very little about Adrienne Rich, the woman. Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1929, one of two daughters of Helen and Arnold Rich. Her father, a brilliant pathologist and university professor, held rather idiosyncratic views of child-rearing. He believed that "he (or rather his wife) could raise children according to his own unique moral and intellectual plan, thus proving to the world the values of enlightened, unorthodox child-rearing."<sup>1</sup> What this meant, in practice,

was a considerable amount of work for Rich's mother, who was expected to carry out this perfectionist programme. She was responsible for teaching all the lessons to her two daughters who received no formal schooling until the fourth grade.

Rich's mother, Helen, had trained for several years as a pianist and composer. She had won scholarships for her music and had the potential to become a concert pianist. Like far too many women, she abandoned this career for marriage and a family. While she continued to play and to compose, music became of necessity a sideline which certainly could not conflict with her duties as wife and mother. I have no doubt that the witnessing of her mother's self-sacrifice made an indelible impression on Rich. It is interesting to note, however, that her own life choices were to almost directly parallel her mother's for a number of years.

Even as a young girl, Rich found in writing a means to express herself and to explore her world. From a very early age, she received considerable attention for her writing. As she said in a recent interview in *Broadside*: "I was taught early to write letters at home, and they would give me poems to copy. I guess I was also naturally verbal, but I got an enormous amount of pleasure from this activity which was approved of and encouraged. So from a young age I knew that I could and wanted to write. The later dis-

covery that you're loved and encouraged so long as you write on a certain kind of topic was yet to come."<sup>2</sup>

In 1951, at the age of 21, Rich graduated from Radcliffe with a B.A. Phi Beta Kappa. Her first book of poetry, *A Change of World*, was published and chosen by W.H. Auden for the Yale Younger Poets Award. She received a Guggenheim Fellowship and spent the next two years travelling and writing. Despite her gift for poetry and the considerable recognition she had received, Rich felt almost duty bound to follow a more traditional life course. In 1953 she married Alfred Conrad, an economist who taught at Harvard. The couple took up residence in Cambridge, Mass., from 1953 to 1966.

These early years of marriage and child-bearing were bleak ones for Rich, both personally and artistically. She produced three children, David, Paul, and Jacob in 1955, 1957 and 1959. She wrote no new books of poetry from 1955 until 1963 when *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* appeared. Rich describes these early years in some detail in *Of Woman Born* - the guilt, the anger, the exhaustion she felt every single day. She says: "For many years I shrank from looking back on the first decade of my children's lives. In snapshots of the period I see a smiling young woman, in maternity clothes or bent over a half-naked baby; gradually she stops smiling, wears a distant, half-melancholy look, as if she were listening for something."<sup>3</sup>

In 1966 the family moved to New York City, where Alfred had a teaching job at City College. Rich began teaching courses in literature and poetry and became involved in civil rights and anti-war politics. Spurred on by her political activity and her increasing independence, Rich left her husband in 1969. The following year Conrad committed suicide, an act which shattered Rich's hopes of remaining close to this important man in her life.

Of his death she wrote the following poem in 1972:

The pact that we made was the ordinary  
pact  
of men & women in those days.

I don't know who we thought we were  
that our personalities  
could resist the failures of the race.

Lucky or unlucky, we didn't know  
the race had failures of that order  
and that we were going to share them.

Like everybody else, we thought of our-  
selves as special.

Your body is as vivid to me  
as it ever was: even more

since my feeling for it is clearer:  
I know what it could and could not do

it is no longer  
the body of a god  
or anything with power over my life.

Next year it would have been 20 years  
and you are wastefully dead  
who might have made the leap  
we talked, too late, of making

which I now live  
not as a leap  
but as a succession of brief, amazing move-  
ments

each one making possible the next.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear from this poem and from other works about her husband that Rich is neither angry nor bitter about her marriage nor about men. She understands the relations between men and women to be extremely problematic but she does not blame. Rather, she chooses to analyze

the underlying causes of the problems in these relationships in an effort to overcome the guilt which has laid to waste so many women in our century.

Throughout the seventies, Rich became increasingly involved with the Women's Liberation Movement. In 1974, when she received the National Book Award for *Diving into the Wreck*, Rich rejected the award as an individual, accepting it with Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, two other nominees, in the name of all women. The following excerpt from their acceptance speech reveals the depth of Rich's commitment to the women's movement.

We...together accept this award in the name of all the women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those, who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain.... We symbolically join here in refusing the terms of patriarchal competition and declaring that we will share this prize among us, to be used as best we can for women.... We dedicate this occasion to the struggle for self-determination of all women, of every color, identification, or derived class. The women who will understand what we are doing here, and those who will not understand yet; the silent women whose voices have been denied us, the articulate women who have given us the strength to do our work.<sup>5</sup>

Adrienne Rich's commitment to the women's movement and to women's writing is profound. Whether it is writing the introduction to a book on incest, giving a speech at a lesbian pride rally, or working with a group of novice writers, Rich is present in an active and real way with women. As Eve Zarella describes her in a recent article in *Broadside*, "Rich is utterly approachable, without pretensions. She plays no role - no guru, no fragile object, no bored star. There isn't one

iota of that patronizing stance or arrogance towards women who read and admire her work with which less secure artists keep women in their place."<sup>6</sup> Rich herself says of her work:

The work that I want to do in my maturity could not be done without the existence of the women's movement.... We need courage, and we draw on each other for courage, but we have to remember the kind of culture, the kind of politics that we have. And this is in itself an immense step forward, and it's something we have to protect, we have to further, we have to defend, in order for all of us to do the kind of work we want to do and that the world needs us to do.<sup>7</sup>

Since 1976, when she came out as a lesbian feminist, Rich has devoted less time and energy to an analysis of male power, concentrating instead upon women and the themes which emanate directly from our lives. Since the publication of *Of Woman Born* in 1976, she has produced a volume of her collected prose articles, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, and two books of poetry, *The Dream of a Common Language* and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*. She currently lives in Montague, Mass., where she is co-editor with her lover Michelle Cliff, of *Sinister Wisdom*, a lesbian journal.

### **Language: Silence, Power and Naming**

The necessity of Poetry has to be stated over and over, but only to those who have reason to fear its power, or those who still believe that language is "only words" and that an old language is good enough for our descriptions of the world we are trying to transform.<sup>8</sup>

Adrienne Rich is first and foremost a poet. Her prose work resonates with her love and respect for language. For Rich, language is critical to the issue of the powerlessness of women. She argues that as women our language has never

been our own. We have been unable to name our experience, to describe our world; it has been defined and described outside of us. As Rich says in "It is the lesbian in us..." this silence holds significance far beyond words. "Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult to come by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language - this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable."<sup>9</sup> As Michelle Cliff notes in a parallel piece on speechlessness, "speechlessness begins with an inability to speak; this soon develops into an inability to act."<sup>10</sup>

Lacking a language to describe our lives, we have come to doubt our own perceptions. The meaning of our love for another woman. The force of our anger towards our children. Our own sense of powerlessness in a relationship with a man. Our desire for some unnamed independence. Rich's writing is dedicated to the struggle against this denial. In her poetry, her prose work, and her public speeches, she carried out the task: "To question everything. To remember what is has been forbidden even to mention."<sup>11</sup>

Rich is engaged in what she terms the "politics of asking women's questions."<sup>12</sup> We can no longer accept the standard explanations of the way the world has been - no longer accept the absence of women or the tokenism of famous women among men. Rather, we must demand "a world in which the integrity of all women - not a chosen few - shall be honored and validated in every aspect of culture."<sup>13</sup> Thus Rich takes as appropriate material for poetry any subject which concerns women's lives. She describes the ordinary everyday lives of women and the lives of women lovers. She assumes the personae of "famous" women long dead - Marie Curie, Elvira Shateyev, Ethel Rosenberg - and recreates what she believes to be their real voices. She will

not accept the accepted stories. She will re-visit, re-vision these lives.

For Rich, the question of language moves beyond the subjects we choose to write about, for even the language we have been given is the language of the patriarchy. We must create our own language - the common language of women. Rich describes this process in the following poem, "Origins and History of Consciousness":

No one lives in this room  
without confronting the whiteness of the  
wall  
behind the poems, planks of books,  
photographs of dead heroines.  
Without contemplating at last and late  
the true nature of poetry. The drive  
to connect. The dream of a common  
language.<sup>14</sup>

This is a life-long task for Rich. Combined with her commitment to the politics of asking women's questions, this search for language represents Rich's major contribution to the women's movement. In the sections of the paper which follow, I will show how Rich uses these two commitments to politics and language to explode the myths surrounding women's lives and to examine the institutions which control and oppress us.

**Mothering: "This is what women have always done."**<sup>15</sup>

One of the fundamental acquisitions of the women's movement is the recognition that the personal is political - that is, that the everyday stuff of our lives - the loves, disappointments, rearing of children, housework - are all fit subjects for examination and discussion. These are not trivial side issues to some supposed main battle. They are in many ways emblematic of women's oppression, of the ways women have been and continue to be controlled in this society. As such, these everyday things can be

useful not only in furthering an analysis of women's oppression but in developing strategies to change society.

As a poet profoundly influenced by the women's movement, Adrienne Rich makes use of the centrality of the personal both in the subject matters she chooses and the ways in which she writes about women's lives. As Rich herself has noted: "There is no private life which is not determined by a wider public life."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps nowhere is this recognition so clear as in *Of Woman Born*, Rich's first major work of prose.

In *Of Woman Born* Rich takes a profoundly personal and painful experience - the mothering of three sons under a patriarchal system - and transforms it into a thoroughgoing analysis of the institution of motherhood. In so doing, she has provided us with a tool for understanding the origins, persistence, and strength of the patriarchy.

*Of Woman Born* appeared in 1976 at a time when the examination of women's lives was becoming the vogue. Books like *My Mother/My Self*, *The Mother Book*, and *Mothers and Daughters* flooded the market. Mothers, it seemed, were big business. After all, everyone had one. And almost everyone had some problems with theirs. I even gave my own mother *My Mother/My Self* one Christmas, never having read it myself. I was more than a little ashamed to read through it and discover the accusations and guilt levelled by the author at her mother. It seemed that mothers were not only being written about. They were being blamed.

In a review of *My Mother/My Self*, Sara Voorheers contrasts Friday's treatment of motherhood with that of Adrienne Rich's. Both authors deal with the role of mothering in a patriarchal society. Friday, however, begins with the goal of "Let's get Mom."<sup>17</sup> While Rich probes the intensity of a mother's feelings of love and hate for her child, Friday concentrates upon the daughter's

hurt and disappointment. The result, Voorheers says, is that Rich's capacity for understanding mothers "makes Friday's observations sound like the whinings of a spoiled child, for there is a depth of compassion for mothers in Rich's analysis that is absent in Friday's book."<sup>18</sup> As Rich herself comments, "Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her."<sup>19</sup> It is these forces which Rich seeks to examine in her book, *Of Woman Born*.

Despite the recent glut of "mother books," motherhood is by no means a new topic for feminists. Feminist theorists have examined this dimension of our lives in an effort to understand how it has affected our lives as women and how it might be changed in order to improve our situation. In a great many of these theories, motherhood has, in effect, been accepted as a biological fact, the "natural" result of women's capacity to bear children. Not only is female reproduction accepted as natural, but all the attendant aspects of mothering, from maternal guilt, to absent fathers, are accepted almost "as if they were a law of nature."<sup>20</sup> Rich, in contrast, delineates two meanings of motherhood: "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children and the institution which aims at ensuring that that potential - and all women - shall remain under male control."<sup>21</sup> In separating the biological act of mothering from the structures and ideology which surround it, Rich enables us to examine motherhood as a construct, much like religion, compulsory heterosexuality, or the family, all of which have at one point or another been seen as "givens" in society.

Rich characterizes the institution of motherhood as follows:

The institution of motherhood has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems. It has withheld over one-half the human species from the decisions affect-

ing their lives; it exonerates men from fatherhood in any authentic sense; it creates the dangerous schism between private and public life; it calcifies human choices and potentialities...it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them... Under patriarchy, female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood.<sup>22</sup>

In a world where we may consider ourselves to be operating on the basis of free choice, such a statement may appear as a distortion. One might argue that women “choose” to be mothers, just as they choose to marry or remain single, to have a career or not, to be heterosexual or lesbian. While Rich would acknowledge that women are not by and large overtly coerced into marriage or heterosexuality, she contends that powerful and often unseen forces delimit and determine rather precisely a woman’s life choices. These forces, however, are often difficult to examine.

Rich explains some of the difficulties we encounter in examining the institution of motherhood. Unlike the church, with its visible symbols of power, motherhood appears to have “no visible embodiment of authority, power or potential or actual violence. Motherhood calls to mind the home, and we like to believe that the home is a private place.”<sup>23</sup> Rich spends the bulk of *Of Woman Born* examining the underpinnings of this institution. In the following rather lengthy passage, she summarizes these institutional supports:

The institution of motherhood cannot be touched or seen: in art perhaps Kathe Kolwitz has come close to evoking it. It must go on being evoked so that women never again forget that our many fragments of lived experience belong to a whole which is not of our creation. Rape and its aftermath; marriage as economic dependence, as the guarantee to a man of “his” children; the theft of childbirth from women; the concept

of the “illegitimacy” of a child born out of wedlock; the laws regulating conception and abortion; the cavalier marketing of dangerous birth control devices; the denial that work done by women at home is part of “production”; the chaining of women in links of love and guilt; the absence of social benefits for mothers; the inadequacy of child-care facilities in most parts of the world; the unequal pay women receive as wage-earners, forcing them often into dependence on a man; the solitary confinement of “full-time motherhood”; the token nature of fatherhood, which gives a man rights and privileges over children toward whom he assumes minimal responsibility; the psychoanalytic castigation of the mother; the pediatric assumption that the mother is inadequate and ignorant; the burden of emotional work borne by women in the family - all these are connecting fibers of this invisible institution, and they determine our relationship to our children whether we like to think so or not.<sup>24</sup>

These, then, are the supports of the institution of motherhood. But they do not stand alone. Rather, they are an aspect of an entire system which Rich calls the patriarchy.

Patriarchy, is the power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.<sup>25</sup>

It is a system which, like motherhood, is hard to perceive. Rich says:

The power of the fathers has been difficult to grasp because it permeates everything, even the language in which we try to des-

cribe it. It is diffuse and concrete; symbolic and literal; universal and expressed with local variations which obscure its universality...whatever my status or situation, my derived economic class, or my sexual preference, I live under the power of the fathers and I have access only to so much of privilege or influence as the patriarchy is willing to accede to me, and only for so long as I will pay the price for male approval.<sup>26</sup>

In *Of Woman Born* and in subsequent articles on mothering<sup>27</sup> Rich provides us with an analysis which enables us to grasp the persistence of the patriarchy throughout history and through a variety of social systems. Her analysis of men's alienation from the process of reproduction and their dependence on women for their own survival and that of their children provides us with a speculative but thought provoking explanation for the origins of the oppression of women. In her examination of the dualist image of women from its classical representation of the madonna and whore to its modern dichotomy of the mother and the lesbian, Rich probes the role of ideology in the maintenance of the social system of the patriarchy. Her chapters "Hands of Iron, Hands of Flesh" and "Alienated Labor" provide a powerful and frightening examination of the role of medical science and technology in ensuring the imprisonment of women in our bodies through the removal of the process of birthing from female control.

Furthermore, Rich takes an experience we have all had - the experience of being mothered - and makes sense out of the anger and guilt our mothers imposed upon us. In contrast to Friday who can only echo our anger at our mothers, Rich is able to shed light on our experience as mothers, daughters and sons in what she refers to as a "profoundly woman hating society." She explains that "the institution of motherhood finds all women more or less guilty of having failed their children."<sup>28</sup> Women are buried beneath centuries of maternal guilt which we

experience as emanating from our own prison of the privatized home and family. Rich argues that rather than a question of individual failure, this guilt is in fact "one of the most powerful forms of social control of women"<sup>29</sup> to which no woman can be entirely immune.

### Vision: "The Quantum Leap"

Weaving together the various strengths that shape women's heritage, the courage and daring of extraordinary women like Elvira Shateyev, who challenged patriarchal denials of women's strengths, the nurturing of life and care for things that ordinary women display every day, and the new feminist vision of women loving women - Rich creates a tapestry of female vision that points towards a transformation of culture.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to offering us an analysis of the workings of the patriarchal system and the institutions of motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality which support it, Rich offers us a vision of a new society, of a world where women need not be oppressed. In her article, "Motherhood: The Contemporary Emergency and the Quantum Leap," Rich offers the following questions as possibilities for a future society:

What would it mean to mother in a society where women were deeply valued and respected, in a culture which was woman-affirming? What would it mean to bear and raise children in the fullness of our power to care for them, to provide for them, in dignity and pride? What would it mean to mother in a society which had truly addressed the issues of racism and hunger? What would it mean to mother in a society which was making full use of the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical gifts of women, in all our difference and diversity? What would it mean to mother in a society which laid no stigma upon lesbians, so that women grew up with real emotional and

erotic options in the choice of life companions and lovers? What would it mean to live and die in a culture which affirmed both life and death, in which both the living world and the bodies of women were released at last from centuries of violation and control? This is the quantum leap of the radical feminist vision.<sup>31</sup>

Rich does not offer us a blue print of this new society. Nonetheless, in *Of Woman Born* and her other prose works, she does probe a number of dimensions of this new world. One of her central concerns is with women's physicality. Rich understands the revulsion of many feminists at women's bodily functions. She states in *Of Woman Born* that "the body has been made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit."<sup>32</sup> For Rich, however, such a rejection of our physicality would be a tragic mistake. The fact that the patriarchy has limited and controlled female biology does not mean that that represents our fullest potential. Rich believes that we must come to see our "physicality as a resource rather than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life, we require not only *control* of our bodies...; we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence."<sup>33</sup>

Through this process of "embodiment"<sup>34</sup> Rich seeks to heal the separation between the mind and the body which has been perpetuated by the patriarchy. This hierarchical dualism of mind over body, culture over nature, reason over passion and emotion, serves as an essential underpinning of the fundamental dualism of man over woman. Rich argues that only by reclaiming the body, by situating ourselves in our bodies and in the real experiences of our lives, can we hope to transform the world in the radical ways she sees as essential.

In the Afterword to *Of Woman Born*, Rich talks with great hope about the possibility of women repossessing our bodies, and, through this process, transforming the world in unimagined ways:

The repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers. The female body has been both territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited and assembly-line turning out life. We need to image a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world, women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and when we choose) but the visions and the thinking necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence - a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed. This is where we have to begin.<sup>35</sup>

Rich does not describe the ways in which such a transformation might take place. In her discussion of the struggles of the women's movement in the areas of health care, abortion rights and welfare, however, she does provide examples of women beginning to demand and take control of our own lives.

The vast majority of *Of Woman Born* is devoted to an analysis of the ways in which motherhood has been destroyed by the patriarchy. In her chapters on sons and daughters, however, Rich does explore the possibilities for transformation of these fundamental human relationships. Rich argues in "Mother and Son, Woman and Man" that the relationship between a mother and her son need not remain a painful and contradictory one. In a moving passage she asks:

What do we want for our sons?... We want them to remain, in the deepest sense, sons of the mother, yet also grow into themselves, to discover new ways of being men, even as we are discovering new ways of being women.<sup>36</sup>

and further she states:

If I could have one wish for my sons, it is that they should have the courage of women...the courage I have seen in women who, in their private and public lives...are taking greater and greater risks, both psychic and physical, in the evolution of a new vision.... Every woman who takes her life into her own hands does so knowing that she must expect enormous pain, inflicted both from within and without. I would like my sons not to shrink from this kind of pain, not to settle for old male defences, including that of a fatalistic self hatred. And I would wish them to do this not for me, or for other women, but for themselves, and for the sake of life on the planet Earth.<sup>37</sup>

Rich is not specific as to how such a transformation might take place. She argues that it is crucial that men begin to play a real role in child-rearing in order to transform the current view of woman as the sole source of nurturance and compassion. In the process of giving care, men might transform themselves as well. She states, "In learning to give care to children, men would have to cease being children."<sup>38</sup> Whether this sharing of maternal roles would occur in day care centres, in restructured families or in some unimagined social structure, Rich does not begin to suggest.

In the chapter "Motherhood and Daughterhood" Rich turns her attention to the question, "what do we want for our daughters?" Above all, we want our daughters to experience the fullest sense of their possibilities. And since our daughters experience womanhood primarily through

viewing us as mothers, we must try to expand the possibilities and limits of our own lives. We must "refuse to be victims." Rich states:

As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours. We need not to be the vessels of another woman's self-denial and frustration. The quality of a mother's life - however embattled and unprotected - is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist.<sup>39</sup>

Just as we must cease giving over our sons to the patriarchy, Rich argues, we must cease turning our daughters into pathetic victims.

Of women and men together, Rich writes very little. Under patriarchal capitalism or socialism, Rich views relations between men and women as relations of power in which women are invariably at a disadvantage. Only in a society where men and women have equal access to power, or, better still, where power no longer exists in its current form of "power over," will men and women be able to relate as lovers and comrades in a way which might begin to satisfy Rich.

### Critique

To destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood. It is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence as any other difficult, but freely chosen work.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the distinction which she maintains between the potentiality and the institution of motherhood, Rich has come under considerable fire for her assertion that the institution of motherhood must be destroyed. In a review in the *New York Review of Books* Helen Vendler discusses

the dangers of what she calls "partisan writing." She spends the bulk of her three page review citing evidence of Rich's anger at men and her disgust at the mothering role. In this way, the critic hopes to dismiss the bulk of Rich's findings on the basis of the author's unfortunate bias. She then concludes her review with a few rather innocuous extracts so as to end on a more "positive" note, stating that the book's value lies "in reminding us that different conceptions of motherhood are possible; that motherhood is not necessarily congenial in the same way to every woman...."<sup>41</sup> This is a far cry from Rich's primary assertion that the institution of motherhood itself must be destroyed.

Why must Vendler reduce Rich's arguments to the liberal notion of "different strokes for different folks?" She and many other critics reviewing Rich's work appear to be profoundly threatened by its challenge to so fundamental an institution. Rich has dared to attack that thing which stands up there with apple pie and baseball as a cornerstone of the American way of life. She has dared to say that being a mother is often not a whole lot of fun, that she both passionately loved and hated her children, and that she and millions of other women have been trapped and enslaved by the mothering role. Such assertions are apparently very threatening indeed. Thus, Rich must be reduced to someone who has some interesting things to say about "experience" but knows next to nothing about theory.

In a review in the *New York Times Book Review*, Francine du Plessix Gray asserts that when Rich writes about her own life "she reaches moments of great poignancy and eloquence." Unfortunately Rich moves beyond that into the realm of theory:

When she writes about "motherhood as institution" (which, she asserts, "must be destroyed") one feels that her considerable intelligence has been momentarily suspended by the intensity of her rage against

men. Here she tends to bombard us with unoriginal, muddled polemics against patriarchy, and gushing eulogies of a gynocentric Golden Age, all couched in an awkward, vituperative prose that is not worthy of one of our finest poets.<sup>42</sup>

The critic concludes her review characterizing Rich's vision as a "puritanical and exclusionary kind of feminism that I find perilous."<sup>43</sup>

Vendler describes Rich's vision in almost identical terms. Allowing that "there are no doubt real elements of historical and social evil which contribute to the oppression of women...on the other hand, the puritanical regrouping of women without men, the new theology of male evil, the rewriting of history seems scarcely a solution to the problems they confront."<sup>44</sup>

Numerous critics have accused Rich of preferring a matriarchal vision of society. In fact, Rich challenges these very notions in her Afterword to *Of Woman Born*. While she states that women must be able to dream dreams, she adds that "in the light of most women's lives as they are now having to be lived, it can seem naive and self-indulgent to spin forth matriarchal utopias...."<sup>45</sup> In the same vein, she criticizes the tendency on the part of maternal feminists to romanticise women's capacity for nurturance. "Whatever our organic or developed capacity for nurturance," she says, "it has often been turned into a boomerang."<sup>46</sup> In Rich's view, society will require changes far more massive and fundamental than the simple release of women's so-called powers of nurturance into the world at large.

In the same reviews cited above, Rich is accused of making use of speculative and even spurious sources. For example, she has been charged with drawing upon Elizabeth Gould Davis' book, *The First Sex*, in an uncritical manner to defend her view of the patriarchy and to present a glorious view of a matriarchal past.

When we look at what Rich actually says about the book, however, we find that she admits that the author is “at times inaccurate, biased, unprofessional”<sup>47</sup>, adding that “all these charges do not really dismiss Davis’ work.”<sup>48</sup> Davis’ work can be used “to call up before women a different condition than the one we have known, to prime the imagination of women living today to conceive of other modes of existence.”<sup>49</sup> She adds that “if we approach Davis as a catalyst of memory and imagination, rather than as a documenter of unshakable fact or a failed pedant, we can better appreciate the achievement of her book.”<sup>50</sup> As we see, then, these criticisms regarding Rich’s use of Davis are based on a distortion of Rich’s actual words and views as expressed in *Of Woman Born*.

In an interview in *Conditions*, Rich attempts to account for the critical reception of her first book of prose. “Even something as elementary as the concept of patriarchy, the idea that women have essentially been the property of men for centuries, still goes down very hard.”<sup>51</sup> Rich assumed that her work would not be received with open arms by the mainstream press. Nonetheless, she was surprised by the type of criticism she received. She states: “The homophobia evinced in some reviews of my book was something I hadn’t expected. I had seen the book as being controversial on a lot of levels, but maybe I had assumed a kind of sophistication on the part of the kind of people who would review that book for the *New York Times*, for the *New York Review of Books*, that a homophobic response would try to disguise itself.”<sup>52</sup> From the tone of the reviews I have cited above, it is evident that such a sophistication did not prevail.

In an article on the “op-Ed” page of the *New York Times*, in November 1976, Rich responded to some of the criticisms levelled against her, taking up the issue of the controversial nature of her work:

To speak of maternal ambivalence; to examine the passionate conflicts and ambiguities of the mother-daughter relationship, and the role of the mother in indoctrinating her daughters to subservience and her sons to dominance; to identify the guilt mothers are made to feel for societal failures beyond their control; to acknowledge that a lesbian can be a mother and a mother a lesbian, contrary to popular stereotypes; to question the dictating by powerful men as to how women, especially the poor and nonwhite, shall use their bodies, or the indoctrination of women toward a one-sided emotional nurturing of men, is to challenge deeply embedded phobias and prejudices.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the often terrifying nature of these issues, however, Rich argues that we cannot afford to avoid dealing with them. She continues:

Such themes anger and terrify, precisely because they touch us at the quick of human existence. But to flee them, or trivialize them, to leave the emotions they arouse in us unexamined, is to kill both ourselves and the dawning hope that women and men may one day experience forms of love and parenthood, identity and community that will not be drenched in lies, secrets, and silence.<sup>54</sup>

On the basis of Rich’s own words in *Of Woman Born* and in her responses to her critics, it seems that much of the criticism levelled against her work is the result of fear and distortion. Nonetheless, Rich’s theory is vulnerable in one particular area, that of class. Francine du Plessix Gray, in her *New York Times* review, sums up the issue:

Along with her disdain for men, the most troubling aspect of Rich’s book is her dogmatic exclusion of any class analysis from her feminist perspective...there is the

underlying assumption that men are supremely happy in their roles as oppressors. I join with many other feminists in believing that men are almost as oppressed as women by class distinctions and economic factors which Rich never touches upon... To believe that men actually benefit from their historic and current role is to fall into the genetic determinism that the feminist movement has been trying to obliterate.<sup>55</sup>

The critic is correct, I believe, in her assertion that Rich's work by and large lacks any class analysis. Throughout *Of Woman Born*, for example, Rich speaks of the patriarchy as if it were some monolithic male structure, lacking in any differentiation on the basis of power or access to property. For example, Rich states in her chapter "The Kingdom of the Fathers" that "At the core of patriarchy is the individual family unit which originated with the idea of property and the desire to see one's property transmitted to one's biological descendents."<sup>56</sup> While the question of paternity is inextricably linked to the issue of the transference of property, the reality of differential access to property cannot be ignored. Men are not equal nor do they have equal access either to property, money or power. Many times Rich seems to present only one great ruling class composed of all men and one huge underling class composed of all women. Tempting as it is sometimes to hold such a simplistic view of the world, it is simply not the real state of affairs.

To criticize Rich for her lack of class analysis, however, is not to throw away her theory entirely. I would argue that we need to integrate Rich's theory with a notion of class which enables us to understand the differing relations between men and women in the propertied and unpropertied classes (in the past) and in the working class and ruling class today. This is certainly not to suggest that men are necessarily any "nicer" in the working class than in the ruling class, but it is to argue that these relationships are quite different

and that men may have a very different stake in the patriarchy depending upon their position in the class structure.

Obviously, then, I do not agree with the latter half of du Plessix Gray's criticism - that is, her statement that men in fact receive no benefits from the patriarchy. For all his powerlessness at the workplace, a working class man still has power over his wife and children at home. And this power can be acted out in brutal and vicious ways. This relationship, then, between a working class man and his wife must be analysed in the light of both male female and class relations. In integrating Rich's analysis of the patriarchy with a Marxist analysis of class relations, such relationships can begin to be understood.

Rich has also been accused of a biological determinism from which there is no logical escape. While Rich argues throughout *Of Woman Born* that the possibilities for a changed world do exist, statements like the following seem to belie this optimism: "A woman is for a man both more and less than a person: she is something terribly necessary and necessarily terrible...she is first of all the Mother who has to be possessed, reduced, controlled, lest she swallow him back into her dark cave, or stare him into stone."<sup>57</sup> Rich argues that this need of men to possess and control women is rooted in the biological fact of female reproduction. As such, it is difficult to see how such a condition could be changed. Even if men learned to be nurturers, even if they participated on an equal basis in child-rearing, they would still remain dependent on a woman for life itself. And if such a dependency leads of necessity to a desire to possess and control, then I cannot see how the world is to be changed.

Another aspect of what might be termed her biological determinism is Rich's tendency to rhapsodize about women's ability to change the world. While she repeatedly challenges those who would mystify women's nurturing nature,

Rich herself refers to the "miracle and paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings,"<sup>58</sup> citing such characteristics as our "highly developed tactile sense; our genius for close observation; our complicated, pain enduring, multi-pleasured physicality."<sup>59</sup> Surely all of these characteristics are the result of female socialization and experience in the world. To hold them up as traits which will enable us to change the world seems, at best, to be in contradiction with Rich's recognition of the role of socialization in the creation of so-called male and female personalities and roles. At worst, it is to offer a vision of the world which belies any possibility of change.

In fact, the lack of any concrete strategy for change can be seen as a significant weakness of Rich's work. While her writing does provide us with a detailed and at times horrific picture of the workings of the patriarchy, Rich offers us few concrete suggestions regarding methods whereby these conditions might be changed. In a recent interview in *Broadside*, Rich addresses this problem in her work:

I guess it would be easier if we had a programme that would tell us what we have to do for the next ten years. But we don't and we won't. We will have to find out from each other, from our mistakes. A lot of different strategies are going to be tried. I want to keep trying to move with the kind of radical vision that was there at the beginning of this woman's movement.<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps it is not fair to fault Rich for what she has not attempted to do. She has provided us with a detailed and provocative analysis of the way things have been and the way they are now. She has done this in an eloquent and moving fashion. Perhaps it is unfair of us to expect any more.

## Conclusion

The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities.<sup>61</sup>

In all her work - her lesbian love poetry, her poems in the voices of famous women long dead, her theoretical articles on motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality, on racism and gynephobia - Rich expands the limits of the possible. In *Of Woman Born*, Rich has taken one of the most fundamental institutions of North American society - the institution of motherhood - and has shown the ways in which that institution has functioned to further the oppression and control of women. Yet despite the rather bleak picture she presents us of motherhood throughout the ages, Rich's vision is not a pessimistic one. In showing us how the condition of mothering has come to be, Rich is telling us that it need not always be so. With courage, determination, and the support of other women, we can begin to bring about "a change of world."

## NOTES

1. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (herein referred to as *OWB*) (New York: Bantam, 1977), p.222.
2. Jean Wilson, "Journey Towards a Common Language." *Broadside* (Vol.2 No. 9).
3. *OWB*, p. 13.
4. Adrienne Rich, "From a Survivor" in Barbara and Albert Gelpi, editors, *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*, (New York: Norton, 1975), pp. 74-75.
5. *Ibid*, p. 204.
6. Eve Zaremba, "Adrienne Rich: The Taste and Smell of Life." *Broadside* (Vol.2 No. 8), p. 10.
7. Adrienne Rich, postscript to *Woman and Honor*, (Pittsburgh: Motherroot Publications, 1977).
8. Adrienne Rich, "Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman" in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 247.
9. Adrienne Rich, "It is the lesbian in us...." in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, p. 199.
10. Michelle Cliff, "Notes on Speechlessness," *Sinister Wisdom* (Winter 1978), p. 5.
11. Adrienne Rich, "Foreword: On History, Illiteracy, Passivity, Violence, and Women's Culture," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, p. 13.
12. *Ibid*, p. 17.
13. *Ibid*, p. 17.
14. Adrienne Rich, "Origins and History of Consciousness," in *Dream of a Common Language*, (New York: Norton, 1978).
15. *OWB*, p. 6.

16. Epigram to "Diving into the Wreck," cited in Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980).
17. Sara Voorheers, review of *My Mother/My Self*, *Frontiers* (Vol. III No. 2, Summer 1978), p.75.
18. *Ibid*, p. 75.
19. *OWB*, p. 237.
20. *Ibid*, p. 281.
21. *Ibid*, p. xv.
22. *Ibid*, p. xv.
23. *Ibid*, p. 280.
24. *Ibid*, p. 281-282.
25. *Ibid*, p. 40.
26. *Ibid*, p. 41.
27. See "Motherhood in Bondage" and "Motherhood: The Contemporary Emergency and the Quantum Leap," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*.
28. *OWB*, p. 223.
29. *Ibid*, p. 205.
30. Carol Christ, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-96.
31. Adrienne Rich, "Motherhood: The Contemporary Emergency and the Quantum Leap," in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, pp. 272-273.
32. *OWB*, p. 22.
33. *Ibid*, p. 21.
34. I wish to acknowledge the discussion in Ruth Pierson's theory class for assistance in the elaboration of this concept in Adrienne Rich's work.
35. *OWB*, p. 292.
36. *Ibid*, p. 210.
37. *Ibid*, p. 215.
38. *Ibid*, p. 216.
39. *Ibid*, pp. 250-251.
40. *Ibid*, p. 286.
41. Helen Vendler, "Myths for Mothers," *New York Review of Books*, (30 Sept. 1976), p. 18.
42. Francine du Plessix Gray, "Amazonian Prescriptions and Proscriptions," *New York Times Book Review*, (19 Oct. 1976), p. 3.
43. *Ibid*, p. 14.
44. Vendler, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
45. *OWB*, p. 288.
46. *Ibid*, p. 289.
47. *Ibid*, p. 78.
48. *Ibid*.
49. *Ibid*.
50. *Ibid*, p. 79.
51. Elly Bulkin, "Interview with Adrienne Rich," *Conditions: one* (1977), p. 54.
52. *Ibid*, p. 54.
53. Adrienne Rich, "Motherhood in Bondage" in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, p. 197.
54. *Ibid*.
55. Francine de Plessix Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
56. *OWB* p.
57. *Ibid* p. 101.
58. *Ibid* p. 290.
59. *Ibid* p. 290.
60. Eve Zaremba, "Stand Fast and Move Forward," *Broadside* (Vol. 2, No. 10), p.4.
61. *OWB*, p. 250.