As the American women’s movement of the late 1960s progressed, feminist literary criticism focused on the surge of contemporary literature by women. Women writers struggled to articulate their own unique experience. Rich is primarily known for her poetry, in which she seeks to discover language capable of representing women's experience. Her poetry concentrates on themes and issues rising directly from her own experience, to examine sexual politics, power, and the power of language to transform that experience through re-vision. Rich's poetry moved from her negative analysis of women's power in a patriarchal culture with, for example, her early poem “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers,” to the female-identified, gynocentric vision of Dream of a Common Language in 1978. The scope of Rich's poetic vision chronicles her individual experience as a source and resource to employ the scars received from male-dominated institutions to understand the origins and results of female oppression. In 1993, with the publication of Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose, Barbara Gelpi and Albert Gelpi note that Rich’s ability to use this intense method of scrutiny and self-healing in her writings “has also been her central, but by no means her single, contribution to the methodology at the core of all feminist theorizing.”

In both her prose and poetry, Rich explored the connections to other women writers, tracing a female literary tradition. Rich’s classic essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” proposes a revision, a new way of viewing text contrary to traditional literary analysis. This feminist reading theory reorders the text from the perspective that readers can view “how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh.” Rich’s revision sought literary mothers and sisters in past women’s writings. This feminist approach to reading resulted in the collection On Lies, Secrets, and Silence. These critical essays provide new insights to women writers such as Emily Dickinson, Anne Bradstreet, and Charlotte Brontë, as well as crystallizing the issues developed in Rich’s own poetry.

The landmark work Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution combines Rich’s experience as a mother and daughter with a historical, cross-cultural analysis of motherhood. She identifies the ways in which the institution of motherhood has dominated women and limited their potential. Her vision of a new motherhood emerges, a motherhood filled with potential for all women and free of patriarchal control. Rich posits the possibility to reclaim female power based on the biological power of the mother. She employs this female critique in the further development of her gynocentric theory. Of Women Born also applies these insights in an analysis of female relationships in several literary works by women.

Rich identifies the concept of a “lesbian continuum to include a range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience” in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian
Existence.” The concept of lesbianism expands to “embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women.” Rich’s term “lesbian existence” signifies the historical existence of lesbians and the evolving nature of that term. Rich asserts a primal connection between women that seeks to include all types of female bonding. This essay sparked debate among feminist theorists. The appropriation of black women’s writing to the lesbian continuum is problematic because it may not allow sufficient room for cultural differences. Further questions arise concerning whether this theory allowed for clear lesbian identification or even differences within lesbianism itself.

Rich continues to explore themes of power, ethics, and personal identity as they relate to her revision of women and their sociohistorical reality. She created a feminist poetics to embody women’s experience and redefine reality according to a female aesthetic. The significance of Rich’s work makes her an important reference point for feminist literary theory.

References


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