CHAPTER V

Articulating the Female: Re-vision as Medium

But the Gods are like Publishers
Usually male

....................
Girls, forget what you’ve read
It happened like this

Carol Ann Duffy

Language is a system that preexists the speaker. So speakers are always already positioned by the semiotic system of language. Within the context of social semiotics the flexibility of individual speech is not only limited but also relative. A speaker cannot be alienated from the shared linguistic conventions. Every culture has clear convictions with regard to the forms that male and female subjectivity should adopt within a social structure. In this regard, Roland Barthes observes:

A language is … a social institution and a system of values.
As a social institution, it is by no means an act, and it is not subject to any premeditation. It is the social part of language, the individual cannot by himself either create or modify it; it is essentially a collective contract which one must accept in its
entirety if one wishes to communicate. (1967: 14-15)

Barthes means that a writer is caught up in a socially instituted form of writing from which s/he cannot be alienated.

Androcentric language enforces a system of values that is hazardous to female creativity and female identity. It naturalises the values through myths and fairytales which form the society’s most treasured convictions about normality and deviance. In this regard, Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe: “Myths and fairytales often both state and enforce culture’s sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts” (1979:36). They can be decoded as normalizing technologies that directly address the collective unconscious of women. Only by subverting the patriarchal structures of these cultural elements can woman write or speak uninhibitedly.

Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies*, deliberates on the connotative power of myths. According to Barthes, there are two orders of signification. The three-dimensional pattern- the signifier, the signified and the sign- is continued in both but with a difference. In the first order of signification the relation between the signifier and signified is denoted, whereas in the second order it is connoted. When the sign of the first order moves to the second order, an additional signified gets attached to it. Denotations lead to a chain of connotations. According to this theory, a denotative sign that signifies one thing in the first order of signification gets loaded with multiple meanings in the second order of signification. Barthes
designates traditional language as the first and myth as the second order of signification. According to him, myth is the signification at the connotative level. In this context, Chris Barker observes:

Where connotation has become naturalized, that is, accepted as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’, it acts as conceptual maps of meaning by which to make sense of the world. These are myths. (2000:92)

The denotative signs of culture connote meanings (myths) which in turn are generated by the larger sign system that makes up society.

Barthes defines the sign in the first order signification or conventional language as the language-object, and the myth as metalanguage, the self reflexive form of language or the self generated discourse of language. According to Barthes, the denotative sign of the traditional language serves as a signifier for myth in the second order. This, in combination with a new signified, constitutes the mythical sign. The mythical sign signifies the ideology of the dominant group of society. Myth reduces the elements of “high culture” to simple political constructs. In this regard, Barthes remarks: "We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth" (1972: 114). Since language is a discourse, metalanguage is a discourse of a discourse. So the second order signification is metadiscursive.

A fairytale or a myth connotes a semantic structure that replaces the history or narrative. In this regard, Michael Moriarty observes: "Myth is thus not just a
message, but a message that is political by depoliticizing…. It turns history into essence, Culture into Nature, and obscures the role of human beings in producing the structures they inhabit and thus their capacity to change them" (1991: 28). Myths and fairytales politicize by depoliticizing. This means that they homogenize cultures, erase differences and thus depoliticize the specificity of ideologies. At the same time, they reduce high culture to the same signifying function and construct ideologies through discursive practices of representation. Myths that circulate in everyday life construct an illusionary reality that masks the power structures in a society. Individuals accept this society and their place in it as natural. Myths are male-centred texts that enforce patriarchal injunctions without appearing to do so. A detached, impartial tone is maintained in the fairytale narration which cleverly disguises the exercise of power. Unlike the usual forceful or oppressive type, the power wielded by myths and tales is of a socializing mode. It is a kind of non-violent and non-repressive form of power resulting in self-surveillance. They socialize individuals without oppressing or abusing them. Limits are set in such a subtle manner that they fail to comprehend the limits to which they are subdued.

Levi-Strauss assigns the status of language to myths. He insists that myth is language since myth has to be told in order to exist: "Myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at 'taking off' from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling" (1963:210). Myth, as any form of language, consists of both "langue" and "parole." It has a synchronic structure and diachronic details within the structure. Langue
belongs to "reversible time" and parole to "non-reversible time" (Levi-Strauss, 1963:209). Myth is placed in the past, but its story is timeless. As timeless, myth is langue; as history, it is parole. Levi-Strauss suggests that myths are made of units called mythemes which combine to create meanings in a similar manner as phonemes combine to form words. By de-centring and re-centring myths, feminists create a medium that transmits a female version of reality and memory.

Theories on myths suggest that mythical concepts are not fixed. In this regard, Roland Barthes observes: “…there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely” (1972:120). Barthes believes that language very rarely imposes on myths a meaning that cannot be distorted. Around the meaning of every myth, “there is a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating” (1972:132). He means that the structure and meaning of myths are flexible. The fairytale scholar, Marina Warner also endorses this view: “…it is the openness of myth, allowing for the weaving of new meanings and patterns that creates its ongoing potency” (1994:xiv). It is this possibility of changing archetypes that motivates feminists to embark on the re-consideration and re-vision of fairytales. Feminist poets, irrespective of their age, sexual identity, ethnicity, and nationality, have been re-reading myths and fairytales to identify the misogynic intentions and to (re)construct new identities. They subvert the patriarchal cultural codes that impose unrealistic standards for women and find a space to articulate the obliterated female
psyche. In Alicia Ostriker’s words, they “subvert and transform the life and literature they inherit” (1986:222). Re-vision is thus a subversive reading of myths.

According to Elaine Showalter both men and women have their own wild zones. Men’s wild zone is structured by language and is therefore accessible. But women’s wild zone is inaccessible since it is structured by the language of the dominant order. So from the male point of view it is imaginary or unreal: “In terms of cultural anthropology, women know what the male crescent is like, even if they have never seen it, because it becomes the subject of legend (like the wilderness). But men do not know what is in the wild” (Showalter, 1981:200). It is this space excluded from consciousness and culture that feminist re-visionists explore. They penetrate the legends and myths and provide the muted female mythic characters a language to articulate their sexuality so far distorted or erased. In myths women are always interpreted by men. They rarely get a chance to interpret themselves. In this regard, Susan Gubar observes: “… whether she is the epitome of male desires or the symbol of male fears, the representative of his needs or his revulsions, the woman of myths is not her own person” (1979:301). Gubar means that the woman in myths is man’s creation. Mythical narratives constitute a reality which is inhospitable to female psyche. Women poets attempt to rewrite or revise the myths and to alter the language in order to reconstruct the lives of women. They have devised identical textual strategies to resist sexual colonization through language.

Feminist theory regards “normal” social discourse as secretly structured by patriarchal values. Feminist re-visionists destabilize the social order built on the cultural articulation of femininity and masculinity as opposing values. They
challenge the conventional representation of femininity in myths and tales. “Virtually passive” images in myths and fairytales are either exposed as “dumb bunnies” or are encouraged to take an active stance. “Sexually wicked” monsters are either recreated as role models or are given a platform to vindicate themselves. (Ostriker, 1986:212). Ann Sexton exposes the ineptness and passivity of Cinderella, Snow White and Briar Rose, the symbols of femininity. Carol Ann Duffy gives voice to Delilah to vindicate herself and recreates her as a role model. Margaret Atwood perceives the two Homeric models Circe, the transformer of males, and Siren, the devourer of males, from a different light and constitutes a reality that includes the real experiences of women. Lucille Clifton recreates Eve as a source of Adam’s power and eroticizes the spiritual experiences of Mary, the icon of purity. Kamala Das reconstructs a new logos of love relations between man and woman where the bipolar structure of domination/subordination is completely dissolved through her reinterpretation of Radha-Krishna myth. These poets demolish phallocentrism by keeping men under erasure and by perceiving women at the centre. Thy steal the language that permits only androcentric views and refashion it to mediate gynocentric concerns.

In Transformations Sexton subverts the patriarchal meanings of "the female" preserved in the tales of Cinderella, Snow White and Briar Rose. The cultural notions of femininity articulated in these tales are satirized in Sexton’s poems. When patriarchy upholds innocence, self-sacrifice and obedience as feminine virtues, Sexton discards them as disturbing patriarchal values that reduce Cinderella to an entertainer and Snow White, to a lifeless doll. In her re-visions,
Sexton reverses the Barthesian orders of signification of myths. She considers the conventional meanings of myths shared by a cultural community for the first order of signification. Sexton adds a contemporary social dimension to the myths and uses the myths superimposed with a social meaning for the second order of signification. This is an act of contemporarizing the myths. Sexton explores the narrative potentials of irony and satire for this technique. It is an indirect attempt to construct meaning of history and memory. For, past has no relevance unless it is connected to the present. Contemporarizing myths is, therefore, an act of signifying the past, the history/memory of a culture.

Sexton brings Cinderella into current times with modern syntax and an array of anachronisms: "[Cinderella] slept on the sooty hearth each night/ and walked around looking like Al Johnson" (1981:256). Sexton’s “Cinderella” is beautiful but subjected to ridicule. Cinderella’s face, blackened by the ash from the hearth, makes one laugh and not weep in sympathy, just like Al Jolson’s blackened face evokes laughter in the viewers. In the poem “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” Snow White, the suggested model to girls is also brought to twentieth century through contemporary allusions. She is an artifact devoid of life, with “cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper/ arms and legs made of Limoges/lips like Vin Du Rhone” (1981:290). The killer Queen fastens the lace “tightly around her bodies, as tight as an Ace bandage.” Though stupid enough to be repeatedly beguiled by “the killer queen,” she is a prize to be won, a valued treasure that man can boast of owning and a showpiece he can decorate his room with. The revived Snow White “was as full of life as soda pop.” The queen danced until she was

Sexton continues with the act of contemporarizing in many of the poems in Transformations. In “Rapunzel,” she transplants the locale into contemporary American world of Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor, two Midwest Michigan cities. In the garden of the witch there is “one patch given over wholly to magic -- rampion,…a kind of harebell more potent than penicillin.” There the leaves are as fluid as “Isadora Duncan.” Boston, Paris, New York, Denmark are all touched upon. The parson in “The Little Peasant” has “eyes as black as caviar,” the miller’s wife had “lips as red as pimientos” and she gives him “Roast meat, salad, cakes and wine.” The miller had only “bread and cheese” to feed upon. Again, gold pieces knocked like “marbles in his deep pants pocket,” as the peasant left the miller’s house. In the “The White Snake,” she tries to convey the depth of the king’s knowledge by comparing him with dictionary. Referring to the drowning of the princess’ suitors, Sexton comments: “fifty men had perished, gargling the sea like soup.” In “Briar Rose,” Sexton refers to contemporary products like “cigarettes,” “safety pin” “Bab-o” and “Novocaine.” The twelve dancing princesses “sprang out of their beds/and fussed around like a Miss America Contest” (1981: 279). Sexton lavishly uses such references to persons and things from the contemporary American consumer culture to uproot the tales from the past and replant them in the centre of contemporary America. Her excessive use of imagery lends the appearance of a caricature to the old tales. In the miller’s house the peasant “lay as still as a sausage.” Seeing “the devil in the cupboard” the miller was “rigid for a moment, as real as a soup can.”
“The Little Peasant,” the miller’s wife was relieved as “her secret was as safe as a fly in an out house.” When the messenger tried his last chance, “Cinderella fit into the shoe like a love letter into its envelope.” Such images and hyperboles evoke laughter and remind one of the absurdities of patriarchal doctrines of femininity.

In Sexton’s version, Briar Rose, who “went to sleep,” is the representative of the female in a patriarchal society who is forced into passivity on the narrow pedestal the patriarchs have generously placed her. It symbolizes the suppression of female sexuality. Briar Rose voices the agony of being confined to male-designed roles: “I lie still as a bar of iron. Her helplessness resonates in the lines: “This trance girl/is yours to do with” (1981:292). She becomes a symbol of “every woman,” a helpless victim in the patriarchal world of oppression. Sexton shifts her heroine from the object position where she was “passed hand to hand /like a bowl of fruit” to the subject position from where she speaks to the readers (1981:292):

I must not sleep
for while asleep I'm ninety
and think I'm dying.
Death rattles in my throat
like a marble.
I wear tubes like earrings.
I lie as still as a bar of iron.
You can stick a needle
through my knee cap and I won't flinch.(1981:293)
The image of Briar Rose that Sexton presents is reflective of reality. By deconstructing the symbols of femininity idolized in fairytales, Sexton creates a new language that defies the cultural notions that idealize femininity.

Scriptures are punctuated with the examples of women who could not defend themselves against patriarchal accusations. In the Old Testament story of Samson and Delilah, Delilah is the temptress who is linked with Eve. She is another troublemaker enlisted with Pandora. Carol Ann Duffy liberates Delilah from the place reserved for women in the symbolic and provides her a platform to speak her mind out. When read against the backdrop of the original myth one understands how effectively Duffy has employed the technique of revisionist mythmaking as a medium to present a woman’s view that places the myth in an entirely different perspective. In the Biblical story Delilah cajoles from Samson the secret of his strength. Samson, the warrior takes Delilah into confidence and confesses that his strength is in his flowing locks. She cuts off his hair and renders him helpless. Philistines stab out his eyes with their swords. In her poem “Delilah,” Duffy gives voice to Delilah and lets her explain “the how and the why and the where” of that sacrilegious event associated with her name (1999:28). Delilah recollects in a monologue, Samson detailing all the feats that he could accomplish:

I can rip out the roar
from the throat of a tiger,
or gargle with fire
or sleep one whole night in the Minotaur's lair,
or flay the bellowing fur
from a bear.(1999:28)

Samson confesses to Delilah that his strength or accentuated masculinity cannot
make him complete. He implores her to teach him how to care.: “I cannot be
gentle, or loving, or tender./I have to be strong/ What is the cure?”(1999:28). Duffy
subverts the phallocentric language that appropriates gender identity by bringing
out the female side in the warrior image of Samson. Delilah, the forbidden woman
in the Book of Judges, emerges as the dedicated wife who passionately relents to her
warrior’s urge for a change:

I was sure
That he wanted to change,
My warrior.(1999:28)

So “with deliberate, passionate hands” she cuts of “every lock of his hair.” By
giving Delilah voice to narrate her story, Duffy casts off the whore image
conferred on women as a mere male constructed fantasy. Delilah asserts herself as a
partner disrupting the image of the fallen woman associated with her identity. In
this regard, Diana Purkiss observes: “…by changing the focus of the narrative from
a male character to a female character, or by shifting the terms of the myth… what
was a ‘negative’ female role-model becomes a ‘positive’ one” (Larrington,1992:
441-42). Duffy creates a new language with woman in the subject position and man
as the object of her perception.

Woman’s image is strange and alienating in the highly patriarchal Biblical
texts. Lucille Clifton probes into this terrain that is inhospitable to gynocentric
views to tell Eve’s part of the story that was deliberately distorted to support patriarchal assumptions about women. Margaret Homans observes that in the Biblical account of creation, Eve is "excluded from the community of language shared by God and Adam, and deprived of an equal share in inventing human language" (qtd. in Arnold, 1996: 31). In the poem “adam thinking,” Adam himself disrupts the age old stigma attached to Eve as the “evil” that led to his fall. He admits that Eve is a part of him without whom he is incomplete: “I hunger to tunnel back/Inside desperate/To reconnect the rib and clay/And to be whole again”(2000:78). Adam is lost in an abstract search for language: “some need is in me/struggling to roar through my/mouth into a name”(2000:78). He confesses his inability to name, though it is he who names the creations in the Biblical story of creation. Contrary to the mythical Eve, Clifton’s Eve is the source of Adam’s power. Eve rejects silence, the preferred status for women and articulates her self in “eve thinking”: “tonight as he sleeps/I will whisper into his mouth/our names”(2000:79). Eve is powerful not to “degrade and corrupt” but to “revitalise and ennoble.”

Clifton grants freedom of expression to Eve who upsets the long established convention that projects her as inherently weak. Clifton retells the Biblical myth of genesis from an African-American perspective. By giving voice to the silent figure of Eve who did not “make history” but suffered it, Clifton presents an entirely different and positive image of Eve. Clifton liberates women from the stigma that they have inherited from their archetypal mother by recreating Eve as a “non white woman” who is the source of Adam’s power. The crumbling of inhibiting patterns
prophesizes a new liberating future for women in general and Black women in particular as Eve declares her identity:

    i had no model
    born in Babylon
    both non white and woman
    what did I see to be except myself. (2000:79)

Clifton celebrates feminine strength. Black woman's struggle needs no prior record of feat accomplished but only the invincible confidence in herself. Clifton’s Eve motivates Black women to retrieve identity by sharing her experience with them: “i made it up/…/ come celebrate”(2000:79).The clichéd images of Black women as mediocre, sexually licentious and morally fallen creatures seem to justify the colonization of their bodies and minds. These images so denigrate the sense of self in Black women that they dare not come to the front. Clifton replaces concepts of self with cultural identity in the hope of solving the problems of race and gender associated with the representation of women in the androcentric language.

    Circe, in Odyssey, is a cultural construct concretized in male-centred language. She is a product of male fantasy that demonise woman. In “Circe/mud poems”, Atwood retrieves the power of articulation, culturally and linguistically denied to women and re-examines the mythologically inherited role from the perspective of Circe. Atwood’s Circe discards the role of life dictated by the story tellers. She dissociates herself with the image of the sorceress:

    it was not my fault, these animals
    who once were lovers
it was not my fault, the snouts
and hooves, the tongues (1974:48)

This assertion prepares the readers for a new version of the story. It is an invitation to challenge the existing paradigms with regard to language and identity. Circe in the subject position is the contemporary woman renouncing the role men have created for her. The Homeric earth Goddess and sorceress confronts “the albatross image hanging like withered hands around her neck” (Wilson, 1993:19). Circe, articulating her concerns, is a threat to logo centrism. She challenges the patriarchal ideology that equates strong women with “witch, Medusa, a destructive, powerful, scary monster” (Atwood, 1982:218).

In *Odyssey*, she is endowed with the power to transform men into beasts. In “Circe/mud poems,” she retains her power to transform, but uses it to transform Odysseus, “the myth,” into Odysseus, “the man.” She attempts to liberate him from myths that limit human feelings. She transfigures men to erase their shortcomings for a brave new world. In this regard, Sharon Wilson observes:

> Without abandoning her “magic,” Circe develops it into art: She chooses the unknown, unwritten world of human touch. She is no longer interested in pig men …, (1993:159)

Circe attempts to make Odysseus a human being rather than a myth. The label sorceress excludes the multiplicity of Circe’s identity which Atwood explores by providing an opportunity for her to open up. Atwood articulates the suppressed
dimension of female identity through the re-vision of the Homeric myth that naturalises the evil power of female sexuality.

Clifton and Atwood resist the traditional interpretations of female sexuality by reconstructing Leda and Helen. In her “Leda” series of poems, Clifton seizes the myth of Leda and the Swan and recasts it into a form which empowers Leda rather than debilitates her. She disrupts the androcentric language structure by ex-centring the myth. She recasts the myth with the collective experience of women as its centre. In the original myth and in Yeats’s poetic rendering of the myth, Leda is denied identity and autonomy. Clifton confronts this challenge that women face by giving voice to Leda. In the first poem, “leda 1,” Leda defiantly denies any beauty in the rape that has been celebrated through paintings and literature: “there is nothing luminous/about this”(2000:96). Leda’s outburst, indicates her disgust at the experience and she totally rules out the seduction aspect associated with the myth:

my father
follows me around the well
his thick lips slavering,
and at night my dreams are full
of the cursing of me
fucking god fucking me. (2000:97).

Leda gives up the image of the cursed freak that patriarchy has assigned her and emerges as a controlling woman, potent enough to curse her father for whom she is a sexual freak. Clifton’s exposition of the beastly face of a presumably loving male figure suggests the urgency of women discarding their submissive, fragile angel
like demeanor. Myths serve as a framework within which woman is located. Leda, with her identity erased in the subliminal socialization, answers the unpromising situation with silent indifference. She acts like a template with which the living woman is imagined. Leda’s passive submission to her rape symbolizes “what women have collectively and historically suffered” (Ostriker, 1986:318). Clifton encourages Leda to regain her self kept under erasure by placing her experience at the very centre of the mythic events.

In Margaret Atwood’s poem "Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing," Helen, the passive victim of the male gaze, talks back to those who have represented her as a projection of male fantasy. In phallogocentrism, "gazing" is generally considered an active male function while the passive role of being gazed at is adopted as a female characteristic. Atwood reconstructs Helen, the archetypal woman- as- erotic object, as an erotic dancer who is in absolute control of her mind and body. She ventures into the space denied to her in phallocentrism and enjoys freedom of choice. She has a strong answer to the women who rebuke her as disreputable: "Exploited, they say. Yes, any way you cut it, but I've a choice / of how, and I'll take the money" (1995:33). She has the freedom to choose the mode of exploitation She prefers dancing to the oppression of being poorly paid “after … standing/ in one place for eight hours/behind a glass counter” (1995:33). The binary logic of the male gaze theory is disrupted in Atwood’s poem. Helen is no more a passive object of male gaze. She has established her control of her body that was forcibly taken away from her. She sells her body piecemeal, “thigh, ass, inkblot, crevice, tit, and nipple” and enjoys watching “hatred leaps” in her viewers
Men who objectify woman’s body and devour it as fragments refuse to enjoy it when she offers it “naked as a meat sandwich” on her own will (1995:33). Atwood satirises the literary technique of fragmenting the female body and offering it “piecemeal to the male reader for voyeuristic excitement” (Ruthven, 1984:47). Helen gives rather than lets herself be taken by force.

The Symbolic Order of language is actually the patriarchal social order of modern society; it is structured around the “transcendental signifier” of the phallus and is dominated by the Law of the Father. Sexton’s retelling of fairytales opens up the possibility for women to articulate their sexuality suppressed in the phallic system. “The Gold key,” provides a proper introduction to Sexton’s task of re-visioning female identity. "The Gold Key," is meant to be a general prologue to Transformations. It is a re-telling of the Grimms’ tale of the same title. It tells the story of a poor boy who happens to come across a small snow covered golden key while clearing the ground to make a fire. Being inquisitive, he searches for the lock and finds a little iron chest. He finds a keyhole into which the key fits. He turns the key to unlock the chest and the tale ends enigmatically arousing suspense. Sexton makes it clear in the opening poem itself that she is leading the readers into an adult world: “Its secrets whimper/Like a dog in heat” (1981:223). Her book of odd tales contains secrets of female sexuality that man has always found threatening. She scrutinizes the rules of proper sexual behaviour codified by the patriarchal culture and brings out how they are motivated by an urge to suppress female sexuality. Sexton’s re-visioning is a quest for a female identity based on female sexuality. Sexton reminds her listeners that it is not enough “to read Hesse and drink
clam chowder”(1981:223). Like the boy of sixteen every one should probe into the depths to get at the truth. She prepares the readers for an alternative reading of traditional stories. Rather than simply swallowing age old concepts, we should challenge or resent patriarchal gospels propagated through apparently innocuous medium of folktales.

Female desire is a denied space within the phallocentric frame where womanliness is equated with selfless conjugal love, rapturous romantic love and maternal urges. Culture prohibits woman from openly expressing her sexuality. It is considered unwomanly to experience the sexual act as a pleasurable act. Feminists think that the concepts of passive female sexuality and aggressive male sexuality are actually based on a patriarchal myth created to discipline women. Women play out these stereotypes for the fear of being labeled as “immoral.” So the intricate mental agony and complexity that a woman experiences in her sexual life goes untold. Both Sexton and Das boldly step out of the patriarchal logo that defines female sexuality as passive and self-abnegating. They destabilize phallogocentrism by demythologizing hegemonic and essentialist conceptions of female sexuality.

Anne Sexton presents two antithetical approaches to female sexuality in her delineation of two wives: the farmer’s wife and the miller’s wife. The miller’s wife is cast as an active desiring Subject, the antithesis of the farmer’s wife who continues to be the man’s “habit” and cling on to the role of the obedient and submissive wife, in spite of the stagnancy of their life together. The farmer’s wife is trapped in the patriarchal conception of sexuality that is blind to the female desire. She wants “that pantomime of love,” in spite of the fact that “it leaves her still
alone.” She stays confined to her role: “Watching him still strong in the blowzy bag of his usual sleep” or sometimes, “better/ her lover dead (1981:19). Sexton’s portrayal of the miller’s wife in the poem “The Little Peasant ”is a subversion of the binary logic. Miller’s wife enacts her sexuality as actively as the male partner. Sexton elaborates the vague hints of adultery in the original tale and re-images the miller’s wife to suggest the potential power of woman and her aggressive sexuality that threatens man. It is she who takes the initiative and she is intelligent and crafty enough to escape censure. When the parson is exposed, “the miller’s wife/ smiled to herself”(1981:241). Sexton disrupts this myth of “passive, and self-abnegating” female sexuality that patriarchy projects as natural through the portrayal of the “subjective, forceful and self-affirming female sexuality” of the miller’s wife (Ruth,1995: 232).It is a re-vision of the concept of female sexuality.

Female sexuality that Kamala Das envisions transcends the binary logic. Das candidly portrays “…Endless female hungers…” and calls upon women to come out of the silence that ensnares them: “Only be honest about your wants as woman”(1967: 25) Woman’s body is the main site of oppression. All the signifying systems of patriarchal culture repress physical pleasures of sexuality. Male and female sensibility and sexuality formulated from the male point of view and preserved in myths exert a powerful influence on one’s perception of sexuality. The myth of female sexuality developed by patriarchy forces woman to ignore the “hunger” which wells up within her “ like a forest-fire that consumes”(Das, 2004:51). The mythical characters like Kunti, Madri, Mandodari and Draupadi are
all part of Indian collective unconscious and they teach the codes of proper
behaviour in the ambit of man -woman relationship. The mythological values that
Indian women inherit underplay feminine sensibility and female emotional needs.
The ancient Hindu tradition of Niyoga which forces a woman to have sex with a
man with no regard to her passion also expresses female sexuality in reproductive
terms. Draupati’s yearning for Krishna goes unexpressed whereas her husbands,
Arjuna and Bhima enjoy other women in their lives. The “law of the father”
prevails in the realm of myth. Women have never been given the power to define
their sexuality.

Das tries to understand the female psyche through the pulsating and
explosive experience of her life. Her venture into writing demands a subversion of
the phallogocentric system in which she can write only like a man or in the way
man wants woman to write. So she boldly takes up the challenge to reinvent a
language that transcends the phallogocentric structure. Das introduces “the language
of body” to sing of the sterility of the emotions within her: the quest of a “cold and
/Half-dead woman” (2004: 49) for love that ended up with a “skin-communicated
thing-called love” from a husband “who dribbled spittle into her mouth” (1967:25).
Her detests of restrictions and desire for liberation compel her to explore beyond the
traditional boundaries. She writes in a language that centralizes woman and female
sexuality, and invites man to taste the experience of being the Other in the
interpersonal relationship. Her language becomes curt as she explores her body and
verbalizes her sexuality.
Das rejects archetypal women who silently succumb to the male control over their body and sexuality. As the “voice of women’s sexuality” in Indian English poetry, as places herself within the frame of the most eroticized love-legend, the Radha-Krishna myth. The love that she craves for is carnal, passionate and spiritual all at once and she sees it enacted in Vrindavan. Das universalizes her feelings: “Vrindavan lies in every woman’s mind” (1976:101). A proper blending of mind and body is difficult in love based on socially accepted gender roles. The traditional hierarchy of male dominance female submission turns topsy-turvy in Vrindavan when Krishna, in his anxiety to win Radha’s favour, begs: "Place your foot on my head/ A sublime flower destroying poison of love!” (Miller,1984:113). Radha-Krishna myth is the original principle of love relation in which all dichotomies dissolve.

The patriarchal restrictions that cripple the blooming female sexuality are brought to light in Sexton’s poem “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.” Grimms’ Snow White is the personification of the cultural notion of femininity. Sexton re-images Snow White, the seven year old child in Grimms’ tale, as a teenager in her poem “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.” The romantic tale of a beautiful princess, waiting for her prince charming, is a dramatization of the blooming female sexuality. Sexual themes are magnified in the poem. Sexton traces the close connection between sexuality and identity. Snow White is haunted by sexual threats when left alone in the wild woods: “At each turn there were twenty doorways/ And at each stood a hungry wolf/ His tongue rolling out like a worm” (1981:226). This is the image of a girl at puberty, pursued by “wolves.” The hungry wolves in
pursuit can be interpreted as the phallic codes of the male-dominated society that impose restrictions on the girl’s growth to womanhood. Snow White undergoes blood curdling terrors before she reaches the Dwarf house: “Snakes hung down in loops/Each a noose for her sweet white neck” (1981:226). Here Sexton alludes to the male sexuality that conquers female sexuality through the institution of marriage. Sexton creates a phallic atmosphere in the house of the dwarfs. The dwarfs are “little hot dogs.” She buys “a curved eight-inch scorpion” from the disguised queen. Sexton makes Snow White eat the dwarf’s “seven chicken livers.” The apple that poisons the girl symbolizes the patriarchal restrictions that cripple the blooming sexuality.

Carol Ann Duffy and Anne Sexton critique psychoanalytic conceptions of sexuality. Freud explains the “rejection of the clitoris in favour of the vagina and the acceptance of a passive sexuality and self” as an outcome of the “momentous discovery of the male penis” in the phallic phase (Fitzgerald, 1990: 57). Patriarchal language is suffused with the figurative power of penis. Duffy comically but effectively critiques phallogocentrism by parodying the phallic omnipresence in the poem “Frau Freud.” She seems to believe that laughter in the face of misogyny is the most effective disarming weapon. Duffy parodies by exaggerating its pervasiveness. The speaker gives a phallic catalogue, a string of phallic figuration, mimicking the metaphorical productivity of the penis. She begins with her own perception and then proceeds to other women’s view to support her argument:

… I’ve seen my fair share of ding-a-ling, member and jock,
you could say, I’m as au fait with Hunt-the-Salami
as Ms M. Lewinsky-equally sick up to here
with the beef bayonet, the pork sword, the saveloy. (1999:55)

As suggested by Luce Irigaray, Duffy exceeds and disturbs the logic that
defines woman as lack, through repetition and interpretation (1985:76). She
concludes “Frau Freud” with a feeling of pity: “ladies, dear ladies, the average
penis - not pretty…/the squint of its envious solitary eye…one’s feeling
of/pity…(1999:13-14). Duffy re-interprets Freud’s “penis envy” in the poem: it
is penis that is envious and not woman who lacks it.

The discovery of masculine sexuality is not that momentous for Sexton’s
Rapunzel. She is not swept off her feet when introduced to it. Sexton’s Rapunzel
disrobes the phallus of all its invested prestige when she soliloquizes:

What is this beast, she thought,
with muscles on his arms
like a bag of snakes?
What is this moss on his legs?
What prickly plant grows on his cheeks?
What is this voice as deep as a dog?. (1981:248).

Sexton’s language is different from the language used by male authors like D.H
Lawrence, who created female protagonists. Rapunzel does not find anything
“lordly” or “proud” in the prince. There is no “fear” or “excitement." Patriarchal
discourse of heterosexuality compels women to speak in its terms. Rapunzel is
finally allured by his “dancing stick.” Sexton’s Rapunzel is another victim of
compulsory heterosexuality. In the re-vision of the Rapunzel tale, Sexton displaces the prince from the central position which she then ascribes to Rapunzel and her erotic experiences. The Symbolic Order of language structured around the “transcendental signifier” of the phallus is also the target of Sexton.

According to Monique Wittig, subjectivity constitutes and is constituted by language. The Subject position available to woman is problematic in phallogocentrism. Woman is objectified since she cannot identify with the phallic subject. Subjectivity can be reconstructed in language by deconstructing phallogocentrism and heterosexuality that complies with it. Feminist poets challenge the powerful discourses of “institutionalised heterosexuality” in their revisionist poems. They create women who break out of the binary modes of heterosexist thinking, redefine their sexuality and seek new ways of sexual enjoyment.

Carol Ann Duffy critiques phallocentrism of Freudian and post Freudian psychoanalytic theory by denaturalizing heterosexual desire in “Queen Herod.” Duffy re-visualises the Biblical narration of the Holy Magi. Three Queens and Queen Herod enact the counterparts of the Biblical trio of wise men and King Herod. Queen Herod observes lesbian desire in one of the Queens. She stares at her: “Queen to Queen with insolent lust” (1999: 7). Later, as her little girl cries for milk, she lets “the black Queen scoop(ed) out her breast/The left, guiding it down/To the infant’s mouth” (1999: 7). That night as she lay below ”Herod’s fusty bulk,” homoerotic desire takes hold of the Queen who abruptly decides to terminate “Him.

Duffy gives an eerie appearance to the queens who, by virtue of their sexual orientation, are ghostly. In this regard, Terry Castle observes: “she has been “ghosted” or made to seem invisible by culture …As soon as the lesbian is named…she is dehumanized” (1993:4). Duffy disrupts patriarchal discourses of heterosexuality by naturalising and legalizing homosexuality in a culture that ignores lesbianism for the fear that “by the very act of mentioning it, they might spread such unspeakable ‘filthiness’ even further” (Castle, 1993: 6). Even when she is compliant in bed room, Mrs. Quasimodo, the speaker in the poem of the same title, experiences homoerotic desire. The strange erotic experience that she recounts destabilizes patriarchal concepts of female desire:

But once,

One evening in the lady chapel on my own,

Throughout his ringing of the seventh hour,

I kissed the cold lips of a Queen next to her king. (1999:34 )

There is a bold brazenness in Mrs Quasimodo, kissing the queen in the presence of the king. The homoerotic moment that she shares is suggestive of female bonding shorn of space in the phallogocentric mode of sexuality.

Sexton’s view of heterosexuality as a hindrance to women’s liberation and her inclination towards lesbianism as a form of liberating sexuality echo in many of her retold tales. In “The Wonderful Musician,” the musician captivates a fox, wolf and a hare by his music and shrewdly discards them helpless in the trap. The
A fox who frees himself joins hands with the other two victims to take revenge. But the musician is saved by a poor woodcutter who comes to his rescue, ignorant of the treacherous intentions of the musician. Sexton extends the tale of the deceived fox, wolf and hare to the patriarchal world of female oppression. The fiddler symbolizes the deceptive, cunning male trickster who is in the look out for a companion who would dance around his fingers. Aroused by his songs and speeches, the woman dances. The music is so irresistible that she is “frozen on … cot /like a humped hairpin, /or jolt upright in the wind/on alternate current” (1981:264). But this sexually aroused woman looks “like a fish on the hook/dancing the death dance” (1981:264). The woodcutter, who comes to the oppressor’s rescue from within his own entrapment, is the patriarchal woman who favours heterosexuality. She is unwittingly participating in her own entrapment like the woodcutter who fails to recognize the real oppressor and collaborates with the enemy. He is “like many of us-/little Eichmanns, /little mothers-/I’d say” (1981:265). The fox, “a womanly sort,” can be read as a daughter-figure who fails in her efforts of resistance because of the intervention of the woodcutter, the mother-figure. Sexton always believes that a daughter is never free from the crippling influence of the mother. Patriarchal indoctrination through the person of the mother retards the blooming of female sexuality.

Anne Sexton is indignant at the repression of femininity in Christianity. She attempts a re-visionist reading of Christianity in her prophetic poems “The Jesus Papers.” The infant Jesus, in the opening poem “Jesus Suckles,” speaks to Mary in his own voice. He is like any other baby, a human being in every sense, passing
through the different stages of development. He grows into a typical patriarch: “I am a truck/ I run everything./ I own you (1981:338). The masculinist tone of Biblical imagery and the male privilege in church doctrines have tremendous impact on culture. In the poems that follow Sexton changes the narrative perspective. She traces the significant moments in Christ’s life from a third person’s viewpoint. Sexton’s Christ, in these poems, rejects the sexual and the feminine in his mother’s body. A strange being “lifts her chin firmly/and gazes at her with executioner’s eyes” (1981:344). In Sexton’s view, this female sacrifice is marginalized in Christianity whereas the male sacrifice is centralized. Sexton revisualises the authoritarian male figure of Jesus from the feminist perspective and deconstructs the Biblical material in modern informal language to create a favourable landscape for women.

Lucille Clifton also challenges the repression of female sexuality in the Christian teachings. An overt treatment of sex and sexuality is evident in Lucille Clifton’s re-imaging of Virgin Mary. She offers a sexualized version of the Virgin Mother, the foundational image of woman’s sexuality, in the poem “mary” in the series "some jesus." Her target is to expose the repression of the sexual in the Biblical characterization of Mary. Clifton fuses the religious and the sexual, making Mary holy and sensual simultaneously. Out of the very little information that she gets from the Bible on annunciation, Clifton imaginatively recreates Mary and the “supernatural event that sanctified her” (1987:99). The annunciation is described as an erotic experience:

This kiss
As soft as cotton
Over my breast
All shiny bright
...................
Between my legs
I see a tree.(1987:99)

She gives the ethereal phenomenon a body and a race. The phallic symbol tree and the “cotton” associated with the African slave identity at once Africanize and humanize Mary. Her womb blossoms only to die immature. Clifton poetises the pangs of a stunted sexuality in “holy night”:

    joseph, I cannot still these limbs
    i hands keep moving towards I breast,
    so many stars. so bright.
    Joseph, is wind burning from east
    Joseph, i.(1987:200)

In the last poem of the series “island mary,” Mary, the chosen girl, is depicted as an “old creature” who wonders: “could i have fought these thing?”(1987:202). Mary, who keeps on worrying“ for another young girl asleep,” who may be visited by a star, symbolizes women writers’ struggle to break the hold of a tradition that curbs women’s sexuality (1987:202). In this regard, Priya Mishra observes: “Clifton does not undo the story of the Virgin Birth: rather she supplants a subjectivity that is unexplored in the Biblical structure” (Mishra, http://poeticsequence.umwblogs.org/?page_id=244).
An authentic representation of female identity and female sexuality is impossible when woman is denied voice. Clifton fills in the Bible’s silences on women by re-visioning Mary, who is recreated as an oppressed victim. Clifton’s Mary is subject to oppression, both gender and racial. In this context, Mary Jane Lupton observes that “Judeo-Christian tradition…a womanist tradition, and an African-American tradition” converge in Clifton’s re-vision of Mary in *Two-Headed Woman* (Howells, 2006: 88). Blessed Virgin Mary, who has been historically represented as the intermediary between Christ and his people, is represented as one in need of prayer: “we pray for you sister, woman shook by the awe full affection of the Saints.” It is a communal utterance. Women in unison share Mary’s predicament. Without foregoing Mary’s traditional status as the Mother of Jesus, Clifton gives Mary an individuated female primacy. Clifton’s re-vision of Mary is a critique of patriarchal privileges. Patriarchy that inscribes woman’s story in their image is taken to task. By projecting herself on Mary’s being, Clifton rewrites the cultural scripts. The newly written script is startling, but reflective of female consciousness. Clifton contemporarizes Mary, as Lupton observes, through the use of Black dialects (Howells, 2006: 88). By making her characters speak in present tense Clifton grounds the past in the present.

Atwood and Duffy successfully challenge the tradition that has often silenced woman’s voice by giving Eurydice an opportunity for an alternate life. The Orphic myth highlights all that is heroic in Orpheus: daring descent to the Hades, rescuing his dead wife, captivating the animate and the inanimate, and rendering helpless the Lord of Hades. His weaknesses go unnoticed. In contrast,
Eurydice has a minimal role to play. The abstract conceptualization that sustains the binary logic man/woman is personified in the legend. Eurydice is just a shade, voiceless whereas Orpheus is light, endowed with language. The myth of Orpheus acquires new meanings when the marginalized Eurydice takes up the enunciative position at the centre. Phallogocentric concepts are shattered in the way Cixous foresees. In this context, Roselind Jones comments on Cixous’s strategy of breaking the tradition:

Women historically limited to being sexual objects for men…have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves. If they can do this, and if they can speak about it in the new language it calls for, they will establish a point of view (a site of difference) from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory, but also in practice.

(Warhol, 1997:369)

In male terms, Eurydice, having won the most loving and heroic partner, is the luckiest of women who ever lived on the earth. But in feminist terms she is just another woman “limited to being sexual objects for men” (Warhol, 1997:369). A woman’s free will is overlooked in the myth: her identity is just the shadow of her husband.

The muted Eurydice defines the female self in Atwood’s Interlunar. Eurydice shatters the romantic aura of the Orphic myth with her declaration: “…the return to time was not my choice” (1988:106). Orpheus, the immortal lover gets transmuted into a self-centred brute, pulling Eurydice against her will “back out/to
the green light that had once/grown fangs and killed”(1988:106). In Atwood’s poem “Orpheus (1),” the Orphic myth is appropriated by a reversal of gender roles. Orpheus is only a referent whereas Eurydice is the relator. By providing a speaking voice to Eurydice, Atwood disrupts the androcentric mode of discourse in which man is the enunciator and woman the enunciated. Eurydice refuses to use the language of submission. Atwood provides her a new language to articulate her identity and sexuality. In “Eurydice,” she gains a self apart from him. Eurydice/Atwood comes to the realization: “…it is not through him/you will get your freedom”(1988:108). Eurydice ceases to be the shadow of Orpheus and herself becomes the light.

Duffy also upsets the traditional dynamics that privileges man’s voice by giving Eurydice space to articulate the truth of the myth in “Eurydice.” By providing a voice for Eurydice to narrate her story and to construct her identity, Duffy suggests that, angel or witch, male-defined woman seldom promotes women’s interest. Angel image seems to exalt women, but it is a strategy used to provide a chivalrous aura to man:

Him
Big O
Larger than life
With his lyre
And a poem to pitch, with me as the prize. (1999:58)

Duffy recreates the pair, disrupting the idealized gender roles. Eurydice, in Duffy’s hands, is no more a passive recipient of all that comes her way. She boldly asserts
herself. Eurydice voices woman’s protest against a culture that compels her to identify with a male point of view and to accept a male system of values as normal and legitimate: “Like it or not,/I must follow him back to our life/Eurydice, Orpheus’ wife”(1999:58). Instead of denigrating herself into Otherness, without reciprocacy, Eurydice escapes the constrictive hierarchies of tradition by articulating her legitimate desire to keep away “from the kind of a man/…/[who] calls her His Muse” (1999: 58 ). Duffy liberates women from their traditionally assigned role in poetic production: mediator and inspiration or muse.

By enunciating the tale from Eurydice’s perspective, Duffy challenges the patriarchal assumption that “Women … seek—and find—everything in marriage and family: love, identity, excitement, challenge, and fulfillment”(Harvey, 1993:71). Eurydice breaks the hold of the myth of romantic love by refusing to accept male-servicing roles: “I’d rather speak for myself than be Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White Goddess etc.” (1999:58). Duffy subverts the binary logic by recasting Eurydice as an inspired creature and Orpheus as a naïve who easily falls into her trap:

when inspiration finally struck

I stopped, thrilled

…My voice shook when I spoke

Orpheus, your poem’s a masterpiece

I’d love to hear it again

……………………………

…he turned and he looked at me.(1999:58 ).
Orpheus naively looks back to lose Eurydice for ever. In Duffy’s poem, Eurydice emerges as an enlightened woman who refuses “to be trapped in his images, metaphors, similes, octaves and sextets, quatrains and couplets, elegies, limericks, villanelles, histories, myths” (1999:58). She exhorts her women friends to “forget what you have read,” for they never articulate the “wise, drowned silence of the dead” (1999: 58 ). Eurydice is happy in the underworld “where language stopped.” Duffy creates a new language by centralizing women’s experience and with this change of perspective she uncovers that unexplored part of female psyche.

Language, structured as a binary system, represents woman as the subordinate element of the binary. In a patriarchally defined pattern, to be a female means to be weak. Initiative is a masculine accomplishment not appreciated in the female. Folktales foster this shared perspective that woman is inherently weak and incapable when compared with the self-sufficient man. Male mythmakers mute women’s voice to avoid the risk of being contradicted. In the re-visionist poems, the muted women in myths and history, dismantle this mythic norm by articulating their self. In “Mrs Midas,” Duffy deconstructs the traditional clichés associated with men and women in the male world order. Mrs. Midas is not merely silent but totally absent from the traditional story of Midas, King of Phrygia, who could turn everything he touched into Gold. Her exclusion symbolizes the forced silencing of women in culture. In this regard, Sheila Rowbotham observes: “…her exclusion is not a coincidence, but part of our real situation in a society which we do not control” (1973: 25). Duffy brings Mrs. Midas out of the cocoon of silence to redefine
female identity that is tied down to
passivity and silence. Mrs. Midas, originally denied visage, not only gains voice but also grows to full stature in Duffy’s poem:

I drove him up
under cover of dark. He sat in the back. And then I came home,
the woman who married the fool who wished for gold.(1999:11 )

Mrs Midas emerges empowered from anonymity which is woman’s lot in patriarchy. Duffy is critical of the privileged position that man enjoys, despite the follies he commits. She finds a space for a foolish man intelligently taken care of by a resourceful woman. Positive representation of a strong, assertive and active woman is reflective of female view of reality. Duffy takes to task the patriarchal tradition that praises passive feminine objects for their "ornamental qualities" and condemns active powerful women as “bad” and “evil”(Boland, 1995:237). Revision is thus a challenge to the patriarchal social order.

Mrs Aesop is another silent figure from history whom Duffy presents in a new light. Mrs Aesop, married to a solipsistic moralist, cleverly turns her husband’s tales to her own advantage. She is at first exasperated by his boring moralisings:

By Christ, he could bore me for Purgatory.

...........

Some days I could barely keep awake as the story droned on towards the moral of itself. Action, Mrs A., speaks louder than words.

(1999:19 )

Towards the close of the poem Mrs Aesop emerges as the clever, witty woman who silences her husband’s oppressively egotistic tendency to re-imagine the animal
world according to his philosophy. She takes his baffling jumble of beastly moralism, shuffles it up and levels him with it.

I gave him a fable one night
about a little cock that wouldn't crow, a razor-sharp axe
with a heart blacker than the pot that called the kettle
I'll cut off your tail, all right, I said, to save my face. (1999:19)

Mrs Aesop, engaging creatively with Aesop’s discourse, deconstructs the fixed signification with regard to female identity. Rather than admiring her man, as she is expected to do, she asserts herself as a mocker.

Re-visionist poets re-write the patriarchal discourse of femininity structured on binary oppositions. Carol Ann Duffy subverts the binary logic of traditional gender roles by encouraging Little Red Cap to take an active stance. In Duffy’s poem “Little Red Cap,” the damsel in distress steps out of the sexist framework in which she has been cast. Duffy empowers her protagonist through a reversal of roles/functions assigned to the male and the female in the patriarchy. Working from within the tradition, Duffy subverts the gender imbalance that appears “natural and goes without saying” (Barthes, 1972:143). In Duffy’s poem, it is Little Red Cap who consumes the wolf, whereas in the Grimms’ version, she ends up in the wolf’s belly as the consequence of crossing the patriarchally set boundaries: “As soon as he slept/I took an axe to the Woolf/As he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat (1999:3). Fairytales have always encouraged passivity and domesticity in women. The negative representation of Little Red Cap as ending up being eaten by the wolf “not knowing that it was dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf” misguides women
Duffy appropriates this tale that psychologically convinces women of their inferiority and keeps them chained. She suggests an alternate possibility by reversing the fates that await the wolf and the Red Cap.

In “Sekhmet, the Lion Goddess of War,” Atwood invests Sekhmet, the Lion Goddess of War, with both “masculine” and “feminine” attributes. Sekhmet, in Egyptian myths, is a vicious and ruthless God with a beautifully shaped female body and a lion’s head. Atwood retrieves from the attributed ferociousness the image of a Goddess who is fierce but gentle. She shows aggressive warrior traits: “I battle/My roar meant slaughter” (1995:39). At the same time, she is a “kind lion” who comes “with bandages in her mouth/and the soft body of a woman” (1995:39). Sekhmet, who declares herself to be “the deity who[not only] kills for pleasure” [but] “also heals” defies the traditional gender attributes. She articulates her identity that contradicts the patriarchal version: “But if it's selfless love you're looking for, you've got the wrong goddess” (1995:39). Atwood’s re-vision is a liberating experience for women confined to domesticity and maternity by their self-effacing nature naturalized through myths and tales.

Feminist revisionists have a fascination for powerful females who, in male terms, are “monstrous.” In her speech “Spotty-Handed Villainesses,” Atwood observes that the horrid women in mythologies have always fascinated her: “…I was paralysed by the scene in which the evil queen drinks the magic potion and changes her shape. What power, what untold possibilities!” (http://www.owtoad.com/villainesses.html). While speaking on the problems of “Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature,” Atwood reminds the readers
that women have vices as well as virtues: “They are fully dimensional human beings; they too have subterranean depths” (http://www.owtoad.com/villainesses.html). Duffy’s Mrs Quasimodo is such a persona. Duffy subverts the patriarchal structure in which woman is an appendage by recreating Mrs Quasimodo as a woman “bent on revenge” and desirous of silencing her husband. Quasimodo, the bell ringer, is the Hunchback in Victor Hugo’s novel, *The Hunchback of Notre dame*. Duffy invents for him a wife who is “sweet-tempered, good at needlework,” but as misshapen as her husband(1999:34). In spite of being a good wife, Mrs Quasimodo fails to retain her husband’s interest in her: “Soon enough/he started to find fault”(1999:34). Mrs Quasimodo’s dutiful nature fails to compensate her “heavy dugs,” ”thighs of lad” and “wobbling gut”(1999:34 ). Though his wife’s presence makes him physically confident, he deceives her. Her husband’s fascination for “the pin-up gypsy” outside the window infuriates the speaker and she silences “the bell ringer” by ripping out “the brazen tongues” of bells, that he called by pet names, ”Mary” and “Josephine,” and let them fall: “The bells. The bells/I made them mute”(1999:34). Mrs Quasimodo sits on judgment of her husband who is disloyal to her by silencing him. Her ripping out the tongues is figured as a rape as well as a castration: “ I climbed inside her with the claw hammer” and “ripped out her brazen tongue” and she concludes in a tone of triumph:

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When I was done
and bloody to the wrist
I squatted down among the murdered music of the bells
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And pissed. (1999: 34)

Duffy evolves a female language, different but equally powerful, to convey woman’s frustration in being denigrated. She subverts the patriarchal paradigm of male aggressiveness and female passivity. Patriarchal insistence on women to use veiled and indirect style of speaking and writing is censured here.

In “Medusa,” Duffy tries to bring out the Medusa self in women which they have been conditioned to suppress. It is an invitation for women to see and say the “forbidden.” The speaker in “Medusa” is furious that she is made an object of exchange. In the intensity of her pain, she gets transformed into a Gorgon. The male gaze that objectifies the female is reversed. Medusa’s glances and stares destroy the man. Medusa invites her beloved to gaze at her present form, temptingly evoking him with allusions to her past beauty: “Wasn’t I beautiful/wasn’t I fragrant and young?/Look at me now” (1999:40). She dares him to look at her “foul mouthed foul tongued, yellow fanged” present self, understanding very well that the glance which aroused him earlier would “fix him permanently in captive” (1999:40). Critiquing the theories of feminine lack and penis envy, Cixous observes that the man who gazes on Medusa will be turned to stone either with fear or with arousal: “the inevitable man-with-rock, standing erect” (Warhol, 1997:354). Medusa, as Duffy imagines her is a powerful woman who refuses to be rendered docile in the face of patriarchal abuses. But in patriarchy, power is masculine. All women who refuse to oblige the male order are Medusas. In this regard, Atwood observes: “If you display any kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise, then you are not human, you are a witch, a Medusa, a destructive, powerful, scary monster”
Duffy has the courage to draw on Medusa’s wisdom, and her vision and touch. Duffy rewrites Medusa out of the deathly role by giving a speaking position to Medusa who holds up her man as an object that arouses her indignation.

Atwood, with fascination for powerful women, makes “siren” outdo men. She re-views sirens, the three dangerous bird women portrayed as seductresses in Greek mythology. In Homer’s Odyssey, they are mythical creatures luring sailors to their death with their bewitching song. Circe describes them as “enchanters of all mankind and whoever comes their way.” In Odyssey sirens represent the femme fatale, “dangerous females,” who trouble the male psyche by singing. Atwood continues with the victimizer image of the siren without forgoing her victim’s role. The speaker in Atwood’s poem is one of the trio. Atwood adds the notion of loneliness to the myth: “With these two feathery maniacs,/I don’t enjoy singing” (1976:195). Even in her loneliness, she entices the sailors to death with her alluring voice. There is duplicity in what the voice signifies. The seemingly innocent signification conceals a detrimental one. It is this trap which Atwood makes use of in her poem “Siren Song.” The loneliness that the siren expresses is part of the trap: “Help me!/ only you, only you can/ you are unique” (1976:195). And the man takes the bait. She achieves her purpose by flattering the prospective victim: Very craftily she wins over the man with promise of telling a secret:

I will tell the secret to you,

To you, only to you.

Come closer.(1976:195)
Men are so gullible and stupid that they “leap overboard in squadrons/even though they see bleached skulls” (1976:195). The game is not exciting because it always has the same ending: “At last. Alas/ it is a boring song/ but it works every time” (1976:195). It is interesting to see that here the woman is at the giving end and man at the receiving end. Atwood’s siren is not the archetypal femme fatale who uses enchantment and promise of passion to lure men. She is just a clever and resourceful woman who traps man by her sly pranks. She resorts to the very simple trick of playing on his natural curiosity. Atwood thus challenges the patriarchal outlook that a woman has to be a witch or a monster to beat the man. A crafty female can easily befool a man, however resistant he appears to be. She uses the technique of re-vision to remind man, who ascribes omnipotence to himself, of his limitations. He follows his desires blindly and gets trapped. Atwood creates a new language that defines man as captive of his desire. She subverts the representation of woman as an appendage with no initiative of her own. Language loaded with the patriarchal ideology of man as the norm and woman as the Other never entertains a female executioner who cleverly slays his dreams.

Conventionally, women have been perceived only in relation to men. In this regard, Julia Kristeva observes: “Traditionally women’s lives have been imagined…either in terms of a single role psychologically important to men (virgin, temptress, witch, goddess) or in terms of their single social and biological function in male society (preparing for marriage, or married)” (Cited in Ruthven, 1986:73). Ruthven observes that the male representation of women is “often exploitative of women” (1986:73). Androcentrism flourishes on the hero image of man. Men have
lived throughout history enjoying the hero image accorded to them in myths: “Woman has only a secondary part to play in the destiny of these heroes” (de Beauvoir, 1960:174). Woman is the “other portion” of the hero but never the hero. So women writers either create female heroes out of the inhospitable terrain of mythology or disrupt the hero image of man.

Feminist poets subvert this hero image through the process of evolving a female centred language. Atwood, for instance, thinks that the false image is the reason for “much of the sickness that plagues the human psyche” (Sullivan, 1998:310). The myth of the hero thrives on the assumption of female appreciation. Atwood subverts the myth by shattering the foundation on which it is laid. In “Circe/Mud” poems, when Circe, the seducer, and Orpheus, the hero, meet Circe articulates her consciousness. Circe makes a proclamation about her disinterest in heroic quests. She is tired of mythical heroes and male heraldry. She tells him at his face that she is simply living out his myth, instead of challenging it:

Don’t you get tired of killing
those whose deaths have been predicted
and are therefore dead already?
Don’t you get tired of wanting
to live for ever?
Don’t you get tired of saying Onward? (1974:51)

Atwood’s view of mythical heroes is explicated through Circe’s monologue “Men with the heads of eagles/No longer interest me” (1974:46). Atwood guides the
readers through a list of men whom Circe rejects as undesirable. Mythical heroes try
to impress Circe with their magical feats, but her interest is in “the ones left
over,/the ones who have escaped from these/mythologies with barely their lives”
(1974:47 ). Atwood’s poetic career has been a quest for an escape from myths that
exclude female experience. Through re-visioning, Atwood creates “a linguistic
space” for all women, from where they can articulate their experiences, both
personal and collective.

In *The World’s Wife*, Carol Anne Duffy recreates, rewrites and revisualises
the male-led world where woman is reduced to nobody and she brings out woman’s
power to alter reality. She subverts history that has excluded women and rewrites
it from a female perspective. The hero image of the icons collapse when their
wives articulate their experiences. By introducing a female version of reality, Duffy
unsettles the masculinist hierarchical representations of identity. Icarus, from his
wife’s perspective, is “a total, utter, absolute, Grade A pillock” (1999:54 ). Eurydice
confesses that she was happier “in the Underworld, a shade” than with Orpheus:
“In fact girls, I’d rather be dead” (1999:58). Aesop, the literary genius, is nothing
but an “ass hole” in his wife’s view. Darwin walked into fame with his theory of
evolution, but Mrs Dawin, who triggered his intellect with her contemptuous and
casual remark, could not extend her claim beyond the pages of her diary:

> 7 April 1852

> Went to the Zoo

> I said to Him—

> Some thing about that Chimpanzee over there reminds
me of you. (1999:20)

Mrs Darwin/woman confines her self hidden in diaries, the private female space that allows intimate counter-discourse. The patriarchal faith, that has granted all natural powers of mankind to men, ignores or suppresses female creativity. Duffy evolves a female-centred language to equip women for a counter-discourse beyond the private female space.

Duffy dismantles the seemingly idealistic vision of history that excludes female experience and brings it down to contemporary reality by the inclusion of female knowledge. Noah, Bach and Sisyphus, delineated from the perspective of Mrs Sysyphus stand for the workaholic husbands who disregard the emotional vacuum that their wives experience:

But I lie alone in the dark

Feeling like Noah’s wife did

When he hammered away at the Ark;

Like Frau Sebastian Bach.

My voice reduced to a squawk,

My smile to a twisted smirk;

While, upon the deepening murk of the hill,

He is giving one hundred percent and more to his work. (1999: 22)

Duffy articulates her claim that women’s oppression is universal and timeless by giving voice to Mrs Sysyphus.

According to Luce Irigaray, the centrality of logos, the Word, establishes the patriarchal power: “Man becomes God as the Word, then as the Word made
flesh…. the power …relayed by the linguistic code, the logos. Which wants to become the all-embracing truth” (1993:68). Irigaray observes that the male appropriation of the linguistic code helps man to universalize the supremacy of man. He becomes God by giving himself an invisible father, a father language. Revisionist poets in their effort to evolve a female language challenge the divine authority that excludes women. Margaret Atwood’s poetic persona, Half-Hanged Mary, engages in an argument with God: “Well God, now that I am up here/…/we can continue our quarrel/ the one about free will” (1995:61). Atwood’s persona refutes the notion of a benevolent patriarchal God. God has been unjust to her and so she is entitled to subvert the language that supposedly inscribes divine authority: “having been hanged for something/I never said,/I can now say anything I can say” (1995:62).

Anne Sexton dares to address Godfather Death as “Mister tyranny” in the poem “Godfather Death.” She challenges the pervading dictatorial tone of patriarchy in the institutions of both religion and family. She tries to do away with the problematic relationship between the authoritarian male as the head and other members of the family that such stories inculcate. In the conventional patriarchal structure, the primary position is always set apart for the authoritarian father. Any attempt at subversion spells disaster. In Grimms’ “Godfather Death” written from the male perspective, this norm is strictly followed: when the Godfather Death appears at the head of the patient everything is fine and the patient recovers. But when he appears at the feet things fall apart: the patient dies. Sexton slightly alters the tale in the poem. She subverts the position of Godfather Death to give voice to
the suppressed agitation of the subordinated female in all the patriarchal institutions. The intense desire to retaliate is reflected in the way Sexton changes the tale. She shifts Godfather’s position from head to foot. Contrary to the original tale, in Sexton’s version the presence of Godfather Death at the head position indicates disaster. It brings in death whereas his position at the feet ushers in life. Sexton disinvests the males of their privileged position in language and culture without any upheaval, facilitating the evolution of an alternative medium.

God is “perfect imperfection” in Lucille Clifton’s “brothers” and, daringly enough, Lucifer is His critic. Clifton imagines God and Lucifer as equally stubborn brothers. Lucifer invites God for a sojourn and discourse:

come coil with me

here in creation’s bed

like two old brothers

who watched it happen and wondered

what it meant. (1993:69)

From Lucifer’s perspective, they have been together in the creation story and so they are entitled for a break. Lucifer disinvests God of his omniscience by charging him with misconception of his own identity. God failed to realize that “the rib and rain and clay” that defined him had been created in His own image:

its pride

its unsteady dominion

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

the face, both he and she
the odd ambition, the desire

to reach beyond the stars

…is you. (1993:72)

God, the omniscient, has to take it from Lucifer, the wretched, that human failings reflect his own weakness, for He created them in His own image.

Clifton challenges racism, colonialism and patriarchy by redefining patriarchal Christianity. In this regard, Akasha Hull observes: “Clifton succeeds at transforming the Bible from a patriarchal to an Afro-centric feminist, sexual and broadly mystical text” (Prins, 1997:293). Clifton establishes an alternate tradition by revising the Biblical stories and characters from the perspective of the doubly colonized Black woman. Clifton elevates the status of the Black by bringing down to the earth the Biblical figures whom she transforms into plain Black folks. Clifton’s Biblical personages show human characteristics. Jonah, speaking from the belly of the whale, remembers the “…green/ In the trees…/ And the smell of mango/ And yams” (2000:97). He is nostalgic about his home: “… if I had a drum/I would send to the brothers” (2000:97).

Man-made language can and will reflect only the male versions of female existence and experience. Women are victimized by the power of cultural discourses with regard to love and marriage. The myth of love and romance colours our relations. The vision of “happily ever after” persists, even though real life speaks the opposite. Many women look at marriage as a space for male hegemony: “Marriage, locks a woman into a social system that denies her autonomy” (de Beauvoir, 1960: 494). In marriage women exchange their independence and
individuality for an illusion of love and security. Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood
and Kamala Das visualize marriage from a female point of view. This female-
centred approach demystifies the myth of marriage. Cinderella’s marriage with the
prince is a death-in-life experience:

Cinderella and the prince

lived they say, happily ever after,

like two dolls in a museum case

never bothered by diapers or dust

never arguing over the timing of an egg

never telling the same story twice

never getting middle aged spread

their darling smiles pasted on for eternity. (1981:258)

Sexton repudiates what the patriarchal narratives intend to articulate by locking up
Cinderella and the prince “in a museum case.” Their doll-like existence indicates
lack of the possibility of development. All the fun and thrill of life vanish with
marriage in “The Twelve Dancing Princesses”:

He had won. The dancing shoes would dance

No more. The princesses were torn from

Their night life like a baby from its pacifier.

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

At the wedding the princesses averted their eyes

And sagged like old sweat shirts. (1981:281)
Such a life, robs off all spirit and is likely to lead to “a devastating boredom with life” (Friedan, 1963:75). The twelve dancing princesses, who escape “locked” and “bolted” doors to dance like “taxi girls at Roseland/ as if those tickets would run out,” end up sagged like “old sweat shirts” (1981:281). The servant in “The White Snake” sexually conquers the princess. He acquires his power by eating the forbidden snake “oiled and brooding/and desirably slim (1981:230). He returns to the princess with the apple and says: “…here is what you hunger for.” She takes a bite and ends up “a kind of blue funk.” Sexton here alludes to how men sexually conquer women. They consume the “apple” and “played house, little charmers, exceptionally well” (1981:232). Sexual compatibility keeps them together. But the future that awaits them is dull, drained off vitality:

They were placed in a box
and painted identically blue
and thus passed their days
living happily ever after-
a kind of coffin,
a kind of blue funk. (1981:232)

The Frog Prince establishes mastery over the princess through marriage. In a sweet patronizing manner, he pins her down to his world leaving no loophole for her escape. Sexton links her confused inner self to the symbolic Other, the frog:

My guilts are what
we catalogue
I’ll take a knife
and chop up frog. (1981: 282)

In spite of all the accomplishments a woman may have, she is reduced to a non-entity with the suppression of her sexuality. Sexton’s feminist re-visioning tears off the façade of happiness that patriarchy envisions and transmits through fairytales. She appropriates the happily settled princesses of fairytales and resituates them in a death-like atmosphere. In this regard, Alicia Ostriker observes: “…half of Sexton’s tales end in marriage, and most of these marriages are seen as some form of either selfishness or captivity” (Colburn, 1988: 270). The poem ”Cinderella” reflects the theory of the American Dream: the irony of living life in a "glass case" and being un-affected by the world. One is reminded of Betty Friedan’s feminine mystique, “the problem that has no name” (1963: 9). She speaks of women who have been taught “to glory in their own femininity” (1963: 58). Catch a man and keep him is the ultimate aim of life for the middle class White American women:

The suburban house wife-she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife freed by science and labour saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth, and the illness of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, and her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment. (1963: 61)

Even within this complacency Friedan recognizes a voice within women who want something more than the domestic bliss that denies self-fulfilment. Through a re-
visionary reading of *Grimms' fairytales* Sexton makes an attempt to explicate the emptiness and incompleteness that women experience but fail to decipher.

Atwood satirizes romantic love in *Power Politics* by subverting the courtly tradition of poetry in which the male lover poet defines himself through his desire for the female. Atwood exposes the myth of romantic love and presents an alternate vision by delineating man/woman relationship from the perspective of the female “I” in *Power Politics*. By giving voice to the culturally silenced “I,” Atwood brings out the suppressed resentment and hostility of the female partner who is denied individuality: “My love for you is the love/of one statue for another: tensed/and static” (1996:7). The psychological subjugation that woman undergoes is given voice: “…you hold me by the left ankle/so that my head brushes the ground, (1996:7). Atwood reproduces stereotypical romantic encounters which turn out to be disasters:

I raise the magic fork

Over the plate of beef fried rice

And plunge it into your heart.(1996:5)

In the restaurant, the woman turns out to be witch who touches the man with the fork and he is transformed into a superman who hangs suspended above the city. The female “I” projects a monstrous Other. The myth of romantic love constructed by man is based on his fractured understanding of woman as a sex object. By recreating this object of male fantasy, Atwood erases patriarchal misconception with regard to female sexuality and decentres the symbolic system that marginalizes women. Male attempts to impose authority are ridiculed in the poem
“My beautiful wooden leader.” In the poem, the knight in “his heroic struggle to become real” makes himself a fool. He is followed by “hordes” of women in parodic procession. But his effort to impress his authority fails, for “the people all/ride off in the other direction” (1996:7).

Kamala Das’s persona discards the patriarchal myths of romantic love and marriage evolved from the collective male unconscious. Based on her real life experiences she creates a concrete, realistic image of the institution of marriage. The persona confesses one of her disgusting experiences:

….When I asked for love, not knowing what else
to ask for, he drew a youth of sixteen into his
bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me but my sad
Woman-body felt so beaten. The weight of my breasts and
womb crushed me.(1991:12)

She laments that her female body is the site of male oppression. She feels that her sexuality is a burden. Das means that the romanticized institution of marriage is in fact the sex-obsessed world of domineering male. Das’s portrayal of marital relations within the institution of marriage contradicts the fairytale version of “happily ever after.” Her persona, who feels half dead while living with her man, reminds one of Simone de Beauvoir’s observation that women have no say with regard to sex in marriage:

Marriage comes to represent death, a death of the true independent self. Through marriage, woman’s erotic life is suppressed; she becomes nothing but her husband's" Other" half. (1960:455)
Simone de Beauvoir argues that the concepts of love and marriage drawn out in favour of men are fatal to women. Das’s persona, who longs for real fulfilling love, is subjected to carnal exploits. There is no compatibility either emotional or sexual: “In him the hungry haste of rivers, in me the ocean’s/ tireless waiting” (1991:13). The aggressiveness in male sex act “is part of a man’s behavioural script to restoring that manhood” (Weaver, 2010:241). But this animality is “brutal” from the female point of view. For Kamala Das, marriage is a prison which she longs to escape from. She is afraid that it would sap off her vitality and urge for freedom:

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
not the raw seasons alone and the homes left behind, but
also her nature, the urge to fly, (1991:100)

Das, refuses to use the language that culture and society have designed for woman. She adapts the man-made myth, that confines woman within domesticity through alluring promises, and retells a different tale.

Sexton destabilizes the patriarchal ethos with regard to femininity and beauty by deconstructing the patriarchal narratives that construct the male version. Her re-vision of Snow White provides a context for her to communicate the female version of reality suppressed within the patriarchal logos. Sexton demolishes the stress on physical appearance by presenting the horrifying picture of a queen driven crazy by the fear and anger of losing her beauty. The prize one has to pay for giving priority to physical beauty is horrid:
First your toes will smoke
and then your heels will turn black
and you will fry upward like a frog,
she was told.
And so she danced until she was dead,
a subterranean figure,
her tongue flicking in and out
like a gas jet.(1981:229)

Sexton’s re-vision precipitates a transformed view of beauty: “Beauty is a simple passion/but, oh my friends, in the end/ you will dance the fire dance in the iron shoes” (1981:229). The beauty of Snow White makes her a stupid doll. The queen’s passion for beauty makes her cruel and in the end she danced the fire dance. Sexton awakens the female consumers of myths and tales to the sexual codes in “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” by depicting the evil fairy as ugly and barren:

Her fingers as long and thin as straws,
her eyes burnt by cigarettes,
her uterus an empty teacup.(1981:291)

She, who challenges the male authority and questions the king for violating the rule of propriety, is repulsive and bleak by patriarchal standards. Sexton constricts the dependent and passive Snow White within the limits of socially defined self. The “unsoiled” Snow White “as white as bonefish” is nothing but a “dumb bunny,” “rolling her china-blue doll eyes/open and shut”(1981:225). Sexton gives women
access to reality through her re-vision of Snow White, the archetypal damsel in distress that curtails women’s personal and professional realizations.

Lucille Clifton shatters the cultural expectations inscribed on the body, as she pays homage to her fat hips in the poem “Homage to my hips.” Culture that reads fat body as non-feminine instills negative self-image in women who fail to keep up the conventional norms of beauty. In this regard, Naomi Wolf observes: “… female fat is the subject of public passion. And women feel guilty about female fat” (1990:179). Clifton combines the cultural and the personal in the celebration of her hips which is non-feminine by cultural standards: “these hips are big hips/they need space to/move around in (1987:168). The speaker refuses to be circumscribed by norms formulated by men: “they don’t fit into little/petty places” (1987:168). Clifton reminds women that myths of femininity and beauty are patriarchal constructions that enslave women. She proudly declares that her hips are free:

these hips
are free hips.
they don’t like to be held back.
these hips have never been enslaved. (1987:168)

She reminds women who strive to meet culturally prescribed definitions of womanhood that it is a foolish barter exchanging freedom and strength with surveillance and weakness. The speaker, who celebrates the freedom of her hips, refers to both the bondages, racial and sexual:

they go where they want to go
they do what they want to do.
these hips are mighty hips.
these hips are magic hips.
i have known them
to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top!(1987:168)

Free from the bondage of cultural norms and tradition, the speaker experiences sexual euphorbia. She is liberated to enjoy sex as much as man. She defies the doctrines of male dominated body image by paying a tribute to her hips.

Feminist poets retell myths to reason women on the necessity of evolving a female-centred language. Masculine and feminine cultural priorities vary on account of their interpolated positions in language. Man, preoccupied with the policy of domination, fails to recognize woman’s voice. In this regard, Dorothy Miller Richardson remarks: “In speech with a man, a woman is at a disadvantage—because they speak different languages. She may understand his. Hers he will never speak nor understand… she must, therefore, stammeringly, speak his” (qtd. in Gabler, 1995:243). Mrs. Midas, whom Duffy recreates from history, fails to establish a bond with her husband in the absence of a proper medium. Relationships do not count much in the world of Midas. His greed for wealth kills all his finer sensibilities. Material success is much more important to him than emotional fulfilment. In his selfishness he fails to understand his wife’s aspirations. In this regard, Dorothy Richardson observes that no woman can reveal “her mental measure… even the fringe of her consciousness” using the language of men. (1995:243). Richardson emphasizes woman’s total disbelief in androcentric
language. Mrs. Midas, speaks out her conviction boldly: “What gets me now is not the idiocy or greed/but lack of thought for me. Pure selfishness…” (1999:11). Mrs Midas shares with her readers the wistful longing that she could never effectively communicate in the androcentric language: “I miss most/even now, his hands, his warm hands on my skin, his touch” (1999:11). Duffy’s remything constitutes a proper medium for women to convey her inner process to both male and female readers.

In the poem “Rumpelstiltskin,” Sexton also suggests the urgency of evolving a female centred language to depict female experience. The oppressive patriarchal ideology demands total surrender from women. Internalized norms crush their ambitions and prevent them from thinking of an alternate possibility. In Sexton’s poem the dwarf is a personification of the negative feelings that cripple our personality. Sexton connects the myth to our lives: “Inside many of us/Is a small old man/Who wants to get out” (1981:233). Sexton prepares the readers for a psychoanalytic treatment of the tale by presenting the dwarf as something internal. The miller’s daughter gets the upper hand over the dwarf by recovering her power of naming. It is said in Genesis that by naming creation, Adam acquired the power of language. According to Mary Daly, woman has allowed man to steal language from her:

Women have had the power of naming stolen from us. We have not been free to use our own power to name ourselves, the world or God. (1973:8)
Patriarchs have the monopoly of naming. This dominance over language gives them power over women. Only by seizing language can women achieve a free and autonomous identity. Women must write about women; they must write for women in a gynocentric language.

In Kamala Das’s poetry one sees a woman’s attempt to create her self. Das speaks for all women whose self is crushed by the institutional prerogatives. Her chaotic interiority makes her a rebel in the social milieu that insists on woman’s passivity and unquestioning obedience. Das’s persona wishes to escape “the cocoon” that the husband builds around her with morning tea. She longs to “take Wings, fly around…” an urgency of expression takes hold of her (2004:52). But the cultural context and the phallogocentric language keep her away. Das finds herself a misfit with wrong tools. The available language is androcentric. She realizes that woman’s inner turmoil and agony can never be translated into the male-oriented language. She rejects the traditionally prescribed language as it can never keep pace with her thinking. A language that dictates patriarchal law and lays down patriarchal familial and conjugal models restricts her imaginative freedom to fly out of the “cocoons” within which she is entrapped. In her article “I have Lived Beautifully,” Das refers to the difficulty of getting proper words to convey her emotions that do not fit into the patriarchal frame:

…like music in a koel’s egg there was poetry in my veins although clotted for want of words to express it….I groped in the darkness to convey my emotion. I was in love with a husband who did not want love…(1975:41).
Das means that her feminine sensibility demands a new language to delineate female desires and aspirations so far mystified in the male canons. She re-images the patriarchal myths of women modeled on archetypal images. In the process of conveying the intensity of her feelings and disillusionments, Das locates the new woman in her language of poetry. Patriarchy has consolidated the image of a silent, submissive woman who unquestioningly serves the sexual needs of man and has projected her as the ideal woman. Savitri and Sita are the ideal representatives of Indian womanhood. Early Indian English writers like Toru Datt used these images to express the mystifying feminine nature. In “Savitri,” Savitri declares her love and attachment to her lord:

No weariness, O death, I feel
And how should I by the side
Of Satyavan? in Woe and weal
To be a help mate swears the bride
This is my place. (2007:33)

Sarojini Naidu portrays the image of the ideal woman for whom humiliation and suffering at the hands of her lord is a sweet token of love:

Fires were the wounds You struck me, O my love,
And bitter were the blows!...
Sweeter from your dear hands all suffering
Than rich love-tokens other comrades bring
Of crimson Oleander and of rose. (1917:101)
But Kamala Das discards the idea of blind reverence. Respect is blended with consummation of love based on give and take. Silent surrender of body to the sex-obsessed partner is humiliating. In the poem “The Conflagration,” the persona aggressively articulates her protest against male dominance:

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried

Beneath a man? It’s time again to come alive,

The world extends a lot beyond his six foot frame. (1967:20)

The persona expresses her frustrations, spite and loneliness through the medium of poetry. She insists on the fulfilment of her psychological and physical yearnings.

Atwood’s re-imaging of Circe suggests the gravity of women’s entrapment. Women are so deeply ensnared by the oppressive patriarchal ideology that it is difficult to escape. Circe illustrates how self-destructive women can be in relation to men. She finds it difficult to extricate herself from the relationship with Odysseus. She is aware that the relationship is fatal but fails to resist the charm. She enacts the role assigned to her, in spite of her desire to break free. She acts out the myth of self-effacing woman when she abdicates her power to Odysseus. She renounces whatever she has for him:

There are so many things I want you to have

... this tree,

I give you its name,

here is food,

…I pronounce these names for you also

..., this island, you can have
... You can have this water, this flesh, I abdicate. (1974:54).

She goes to the extent of renouncing her language that has been the source of her strength. Above all, she abdicates with the knowledge that he neither appreciates nor reciprocates, but passively takes:

I watch you, you claim
without noticing it,
you know how to take. (1974:54)

Atwood reminds through the portrayal of Circe that breaking the tradition is not easy.

Contemporary men and women follow the example of Circe, the archetypal woman who gives without expecting reciprocacy. Atwood uses Circe as a mouthpiece to remind men that they “… live in the story and the story is ruthless” (1974:68). Unless they come out, the drama of life they enact will end up a tragedy.

In this regard, Jerome Rosenberg observes: “Atwood sees the traditional myth of the crusading warrior as a major obstacle toward becoming human, in the private as well as public arena….If women and men are to be released from their ancient roles . . . then men and women—both—must break the chains” (1984:67-68). Atwood reconstitutes the mythical frame by incorporating real woman in mythology. Circe warns Odysseus who is about to abandon her: “But it is not finished, the saga…/…I try to warn you, though I/ know you will not listen” (1974:70). She insists him to forget the “ruthless story” that excludes her and invites him to write an alternate
story that includes her. Atwood acknowledges that unconscious mythologies have driven our actions and choices, but she alters them through her identification with Circe. Women writers can and should defy the patriarchal signification to break the hold of tradition.

Language is the only source to access reality. There is no truth which exists outside language. Mythology, as Barthes perceives, is a form of language that makes sense of the traditional language which is androcentric and hence inadequate for female self-definition. Myth, as a signification of the second order, connotes meanings that are hazardous to female identity. History and story are primarily narratives. There are three versions for each: his story, their story and her story. As the first two are identical, the truth of woman’s existence is unavailable in “his” story or “their story.” Re-vision is an attempt to find “her” version of the story. Myths, as male-centred narrative, are oppressive in the sense that they limit knowledge and distort reality. All forms of language are hegemonic, oppressive to one section of the society or the other. Androcentric language is inherently hegemonic since patriarchy is a hierarchical power structure. Toni Morison also observes: “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge”(http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html). The oppressive language fails to represent the experience of the oppressed.

Anne Sexton, Kamala Das, Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy and Lucille Clifton belong to different cultural tradition. But, in their quest for self definition,
they explore the same technique to confront the inadequacy of the linguistic medium in the literary expression of female consciousness. They subvert the phallogocentrism of myths and fairytales and domesticate or naturalise them as a medium of self-expression. Re-vision is a derivative discourse explored to counter the phallocentric discourse of mythology. The new metalanguage evolved from myth is reflective of the true female experiences in a phallocentric society. Re-vision is thus a process of expurgation through which androcentric elements inimical to female identity are removed from myths. Revised myths constitute a medium that can truly represent the female identity and female sexuality. Revisioned myths form a derivative counter-discourse explored in the oppositional practice of gynocentrism. They reflect not only the nature and strength of female vision but also the injustice and violences endemic in male-centred cultures. Revisioned myths construct a medium suitable for the ideological representation of female identity. What ultimately remains of a narrative is language. So re-visioned myths make up a linguistic medium appropriate to gynocentric narratives.