Conclusion

Society is patriarchal all over the world. Patriarchy is the politics of male dominance. Power, regime or penal, rests in male hands. Patriarchal power structures keep women in a subordinate state. Women bear discrimination, marginalisation and oppression, on account of their gender. The traditional gender roles cast by patriarchy curb the potential of women. Different kinds of mystique are created around the image of the conventional woman. She is stereotyped as an angel of love and sacrifice. For centuries, male writers have strictly guarded the domain of letters and discouraged the creative endeavours of women. Artistic and creative attempts by women have been considered unconventional, if not abnormal. Phallocentric myth of creativity subordinates woman and confines her within the male-authored texts. Sandra M Gilbert's "Literary Paternity" looks specifically at literary history to find that an overwhelming number of male authors have attributed their creative capacity directly to their bodily configuration (Adams, 1979: 490). As per the paternity theory of art any literary text is the product of the union between a virgin blank page and the phallic pen. Writing is analogous to biological creation which again is parallel to the process of creation in nature. The supporters of the paternity theory argue that creativity is rooted in the pivotal role of the male as the seed-giver and the subordinate role of the female as the seed-receiver. In medieval literature man is imaged as the sower of the seed and woman as the field and the sexual union as an act involving a plough and a furrow. Though it is the female who gives birth, a woman cannot conceive without the help of a man. Unfortunately, this analogy is extended to art and literature to the disadvantage of women. Throughout
cultural history, women have been confined to the role of giving birth to natural offspring. But men have significant, elevated modes of creativity. They are instrumental in creating monumental works of art and literature. Even women writers entertain the notion that writing is a man’s vocation and women’s writing is inferior to male writings.

The mainstream writing is in effect male-stream writing. In a culture predominated by male preferences and modelled on the male perspective, the image of woman in literature is distorted by false assumptions and myths. The masculinist elements in the androcentric myths are inimical to women’s identity. Images of women in myths and tales, constructed to gratify male interests, shape our thoughts and lives. Woman confronted with the problem of representing herself is disadvantaged by the inefficacy of the material medium called phallocentric language. In patriarchy language is often used as an oblique form of politics to perpetuate male dominance in society. The question of language brings in more complex problems like representation and reality. It problematises the textual politics of women’s narratives. Feminist theorists unravel the ways through which woman is constructed in language to reinforce patriarchal power structures. Language is a deceptively political medium. The reality constructed through language is a language-specific reality which is largely ideological. So androcentrism indirectly strengthens phallocentrism of language. The phallus-centred system of signification limits woman’s possibilities. Language as an alienating structure for women is explained in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan posits that acquisition of Subject position is problematic for women. It necessitates
the entry into the Symbolic Order, centred by the phallus, which is challenging for woman who is defined by the absence of the phallus. Language, in Lacan’s theory, is phallocentric in signification. As the phallus occupies the centre of language, female body and female sexuality have been negated and repressed in language. Feminists often point out a lexical gap in language which turns out to be a serious problem for women writers. The urge to acquire language is often termed libidinal or oedipal as it is motivated by the need to rival the father to subvert the power structure of both language and family. The child’s urgency to acquire language makes it a rival to the father both in the love of the mother and the power of the family. In this context, Roselind Ann Jones comments: “In a psycholinguistic world structured by father-son resemblance and rivalry and by the primacy of masculine logic, woman is a gap or a silence, the invisible and unheard sex” (Warhol, 1997: 221). This has a parallel in literary history where authors are regarded as literary offspring of preceding generations. Literary controversies are often fought as battles with the poetic father and the poetic son as mighty opposites leading two sides. History, culture and language try to circumscribe the direct expression of female sexuality. So women find it difficult to explicitly write about distinctly female sexual experiences in the male-centred language. It is, therefore, inevitable for women to evolve a new language with the female body as the central signifier. Helene Cixous’s *écriture féminine* is an attempt in this direction. A woman writes with her body as the central metaphor or signifier.

Subverting the oppressive structure of language is the first step in the emancipating strategy of women. Binary opposites created in the androcentric
language emphasize the difference between male and female cultural identities. Women can find a space in the patriarchal tradition only by subverting the binary opposites. In the phallogocentric signification, woman becomes the “Other.” The structuralist view of the linguistic sign, formed through differential functions, as a totality of relationships confines woman to the margins. Poststructuralist theorists Derrida, Foucault and Lacan suggest the possibilities of subversion. They challenge the stable one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and signified. They contend that signifiers do not carry with them well-defined signifieds and that signs are, therefore, subject to slippage and indeterminacy. Foucault argues that discourses fix, unfix and refix signs. Social and cultural institutions construct sexualities through their discourses and thereby control human relationships. Patriarchy controls female body and female sexuality through discourses that silence the real erotic experience of women. Derrida disrupts the totality of the Saussurean sign by deconstructing absolute fixed points or centres. His postulation on the free play of signifiers offers freedom from the confined space. In the Derridian decentred universe there are no guaranteed facts. Poststructuralist feminists like Helene Cixous rely on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridian deconstruction to evolve a different medium to articulate female consciousness. This helps to construct "images of what women have collectively suffered" and to make "corrections" of male constructed misrepresentations of women (Ostriker, 1986:216). The alternative linguistic medium is the female-centred language that women writers need to evolve.
Myths and fairytales provide the base from which a gynocentric language can be evolved. Re-visioned myths provide the raw material for this counter-hegemonic medium. Re-visionist mythmaking works on Derrida’s principle of deconstruction. In the deconstructionist view, re-mything can be successfully used by female writers to ex-centre the male texts. Myths and fairytales are phallocentric texts that provide a male perspective. Re-visionist mythmaking makes an alternate reading possible by bringing woman to the centre or by shifting the perspective from the male to the female. By revising a traditional myth or folktale, the writer reveals what was previously invisible. A new kind of knowledge is thereby imparted. Feminist re-visionists use the feminist perspective to re-visualise a familiar tale which is defined by culture and come out with meanings which are at variance with the meanings accepted by the community. They render visible the component of gender which had been invisible in the discourse produced and propagated by the patriarchal societies. The timelessness and universality of myths sanction the cultural norms of sexuality. These characteristics of myths and fairytales are exploited by women mythmakers to validate and reflect their lived experiences of eroticism. By creating women who break out of the binary mode of heterosexist thinking, they disrupt the master narratives that institutionalize heterosexuality. Re-visionist mythmaking takes place at three levels: re-interpretation of the myth, re-imaging of the character(s) and re-visualization of the myths.

Re-visionist mythmaking is an art for women writers. The mythical framework helps the poet to defamiliarize the events and relations of their lives. It
is an effective art of disguise in which the poet at once distances and disguises emotionally surcharged experiences and relationships. This distancing brings in objectivity which is crucial to the fortunes of a text. Similarly, women poets use revisionist mythmaking as a medium to articulate women’s exclusively feminine experiences. Myths are part of language. Myth is a form of metalanguage. Structuralist thinkers like Barthes and Levi Strauss emphasize that there is no difference between language and metalanguage: they are structurally and culturally analogous. Stories narrated in myths are patriarchal discourses. Myth is at once a language and a story circulated in society. Myths count more than words and grammatical rules: “A language is not words only, /it is the stories/that are told in it,/ stories that are never told” (Atwood, 1987:20). Atwood points to the silence in language/myths. Re-vision of myths and fairytales is a context for women poets to seize the Subject position so far held by the male mythmakers and articulate their female identity that invalidates the existing story of feminine fulfilment. The new metalanguage evolved from myths is reflective of female experiences in a phallocentric society.

The poets selected for the study are drawn from different cultural contexts. Each of them belongs to a certain cultural epoch of her nation. Anne Sexton was a victim of feminine mystique, the role crisis undergone by talented women of post-war America. The post-war American women were in a “comfortable concentration camp,” where they were physically contented, but mentally impoverished. Kamala Das lived in the matrilineal Kerala society, an “alien world which talks/ of Gods and casual sins” and desperately longed “to pick herself an average identity…,” a post
colonial Indian female identity. (Das, 1991:9). Margaret Atwood’s poetry has to be read in the context of the “blossoming of Canadian cultural identity” (Cooke, 1998:179). Lucille Clifton, the voice of the Black working class, speaks from the racial and social margins of American society. Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry is political and concerned with the condition of the underprivileged and the marginalised people of the Britain of the 1980’s and the 1990’s. Irrespective of their cultural and racial differences, they use re-vision as an objective artistry in their poetry. Though their cultural contexts vary, the poets respond identically to Helene Cixous’s view that “women historically limited to being sexual objects for men” need a new language to speak about their sexuality (Warhol,. 1997:369). Re-visionist mythmaking provides them a context to see through the phallogocentric concepts and a literary technique to disrupt them not only in theory but also in practice.

In *Transformations*, Anne Sexton’s private experiences of suffering transcend the personal and move towards the universal. She separates herself from her speakers by assuming the mask of a witch-narrator. The mythical frame helps her to depersonalize her emotions and transform them into beautiful works of art. A close analysis of the poems in Sexton’s *Transformations* illustrates how a gifted woman writer can effectively use the technique of re-visionist mythmaking to resist the patriarchal strategy of subordinating and silencing women. Sexton makes an attempt to explicate the emptiness and incompleteness that women experience but fail to articulate. She contradicts Bruno Bettelheim’s theory that the future oriented fairytales help the child “to relinquish his [or her] infantile dependency wishes and
achieve a more satisfying independent existence” (1976:11). Sexton underlines the idea that one should grow out of the infantile concepts imbibed from the tales to fit into the continuously changing society. Sexton rewrites the fairytales retold by Grimm Brothers and (re)presents them as new paradigms of better realistic social order. In each poem, Sexton deconstructs the feminine stereotypes prevalent throughout myths and fairytales: the quiet, timid heroines become mindless dolls; the happy future ends up like a kind of living death. Tales that originated in a male-centred society, collected and retold by male writers, undergo a change of perspective when narrated from the point of view of a feminist confessional poet.

Sexton’s re-vision is an attempt to seize the language and myths of the male-centred culture and recast them into a form which empowers the female protagonists. Sexton discards the identity society has formulated for women and creates a new identity that asserts equality of gender. This new identity would help women to resist male oppression. Sexton has succeeded in subverting the socially constructed barriers of culture. She is aware that it is difficult for women to evolve new identities. In this context, woman continues to be the Other for the male Subject. Fairytale visions of love and marriage also perpetuate cultural ideals which subordinate women. She explores the mythical frame to defamiliarize her sexual traumas on the one hand and to distance and disguise her emotional turbulence on the other. Sexton’s poetry, as illustrated in Transformations, is a re-visioning of the female identity and a critique of the androcentric culture and the phallogocentric language.
Kamala Das, like Sexton, was subject to patriarchal oppression which emotionally imbalanced her. She uses poetry as a medium to re-state her experiences as a woman which, as she has realized, are smothered by the patriarchal culture. Das uses Radha-Krishna myth as a framework to defamiliarize her real or imaginary relations. She finds her ideal lover in Krishna. This identification liberates her from all constraints. Krishna promises her religious ecstasy and sexual freedom. In this regard, Sudhir Kakar also comments: “Krishna’s promise, like that of Dionysus in ancient Greece, is one of utter freedom and instinctual exhilaration” (1981:142). The mythical frame mystifies her quest for love and brings in impersonality which is essential for objectivity.

Women undergo a severe repression of libido in the patriarchally oriented culture that conceptualizes sexuality as a binary logic. Kamala Das liberates woman from the confinements of the androcentric language that obliterates her real lived experiences and provides her with a new medium through the reinterpretation of the love legend of Radha and Krishna. Das applies the cultural scripts of sexuality to this metaphor of bridal mysticism and re-images Radha as an adulteress. By celebrating the immortal love between Radha and Krishna, which she reinterprets as adulterous, Das voices the indignation of woman against a culture that overlooks female desire. Radha, who articulates her female desire that contradicts cultural expectations is a daring re-imaging of the mythical heroine.

Margaret Atwood’s poetry does not allow much of an access to her authentic self. Rose Mary Sullivan’s The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Staring Out and Nathalie Cooke’s Margaret Atwood: a Biography, the two biographies on Atwood,
offer very little information about her private self. So it is difficult to read her poems in terms of her personal life. But Sullivan’s “not-biography” locates her in the Canadian context. Atwood’s dual response to Canadian Wilderness and her personal drive for self-knowledge are objectively rendered through the persona, Susanna Moodie. The imaginative recreation of Moodie, the nineteenth century immigrant into a twentieth century figure, provides Atwood the context to defamiliarize the intimately known Canadian wilderness and her Canadian identity.

Myths represent the values, thoughts and attitudes of the culture in which they evolve. As the contexts of their production change, the signification of the myths also changes. Margaret Atwood believes that unless the gender related images in myths are revived, culture will have to live by a dead mythology. As “the collective and recurrent dreams of a race,” myths have to be transformed to suit the changed cultural reality (Powell, 2004:67). Instead of turning her back to the “inhospitable terrain” of mythology, Atwood actively interrogates the mythologies by which we live and subverts the patriarchal ideology by shifting the values that unduly privilege man. She links the politics of representation to the politics of mythologies with the hope of bringing about a cultural change. She re-tells myths from a female perspective and the shift in perspective makes myth a powerful medium for women to articulate their distinct experiences. Phallogocentric concepts are shattered as she gives voice to women who are mere apparitions and abstractions in myths. Eurydice, Circe, Siren, Helen, all have a story to tell and Atwood provides them a speaking position. In Power Politics, she critically approaches the myth of romantic love and explores the patriarchal codes of man-
woman relationship. In *You are Happy* Atwood revises the myth of woman as femme fatale by deconstructing Circe and Siren. Atwood reveals a more vital power in Circe than her notorious ability to seduce and distort men. She has the faculty to see into, and see past her relationships. Atwood has skillfully tamed and transformed myth to a form of self-expression. She explores its linguistic structure to purgate the elements antagonistic to female identity and to rectify cultural stereotypes of women circulated by patriarchy.

Carol Ann Duffy plumbs history, fairytales and myths, for truths that have not been properly augmented. She connects the tales with her personal life which gives authenticity to the female perspective that she gives. Though not strictly autobiographical, the contexts that she recreates have close connections with her imaginative or emotional life. The mask that she puts on defamiliarizes the experienced emotions and personally known people and places. In *The World’s Wife*, each speaker is a member of a community of women who confronts her male counterpart and exposes him. This partnership of women, who laugh at their husband’s expense, is an instance of female bonding which Duffy as a lesbian looks foreword to. But the historical context distances and defamiliarizes the poet’s self and impersonates the subjective voice.

Duffy also partakes in the feminist endeavour to subvert the hegemonic androcentric language that women cannot decipher. Like any other woman writer ensnared by the male-constructed language, she is ready to “to invent a language that is not oppressive, a language that does not leave speechless but that loosens the tongue” (de Courtivron, 1979:179). As an exponent of a powerful social movement
bent on erasing gender differences at every aspect of culture, Duffy shatters the illusionary world of myths and legends where woman is a commodified object of pleasure who has neither identity nor individuality. Myths, legends and histories celebrate as cultural heritage the tales of male dominance: the history and culture of woman is conspicuous by absence and silence. In this regard, Elaine Showalter also observes: “…male writers … forget or mute half of their parentage…the dominant culture need not consider the muted” (1981:203). As a feminist re-visionist, Duffy appropriates legends, myths and fairytales that have reduced women to mere shadows. Her reimagined female characters celebrate female identity and female sexuality transcending the cultural restrictions enforced by patriarchy. They articulate their sexuality and represent it as they experience it in real life. Duffy seizes woman’s body as it is constituted by phallic symbolism and reconstitutes it giving primacy to female economy of pleasure or jouissance. Queen Herod, or Mrs Quasimodo refuses to conform to the male-constructed female sexual identity. By retelling myths, tales and legends from history, Duffy transforms the hegemonic language and subverts the social structure that validates the marginalization of women.

Lucille Clifton is a self-revelatory Black woman poet who transgresses artistic conventions by explicit references to the concrete details of her identity. In many of her poems there are references to “Lucy girl.” Clifton claims that she is endowed with a spirituality which she incorporates into her poem “The Light that came to Lucille Clifton.” She claims to have mystical revelations: “in the populated air/our ancestors continue/i have seen them/i have heard their shimmering
voices/singing” (1987:209). This unmystified revelation of her “spiritual and perhaps mystical power” is more authentically and objectively rendered in her re- visionist poems. In “to a dark moses,” she defamiliarizes her mystical self by appropriating the voice of God: “you are the one/I am lit for” (1987:127) In the “Kali poems,” the Goddess of death is a portion of herself. Erotism and spirituality go together in her re-vision of Mary where she casts Mary as a Black woman. Clifton enmeshes her autobiography with art when she works within the tradition of re-visionist mythmaking.

Women have been denied the freedom and context to narrate their distinctive stories in their own voices. So they live in a world where man creates art and culture with his tales of female experiences narrated from his perspective. Lucille Clifton realizes the burden of this cultural inheritance, but she refuses to be trapped or captivated by the sexist and racist language and culture. She transcends the restrictions imposed by androcentric discourses through her re-vision of the Bible, which she believes is the source of oppression, both patriarchal and racist. Clifton elevates the status of the Blacks by bringing down to the earth Biblical figures who she transforms into plain Black folks. The poems in which Lucifer enjoys the speaking position are indeed her open challenge to the social hierarchies. Re-visionist mythmaking is a medium for Clifton to voice the concerns of the racial/gendered Other: women humiliated in terms of race and gender. She liberates Leda from “his story” and rewrites it by incorporating her experiences. Clifton reclaims for her protagonists identity and autonomy denied to women in patriarchal myths by subverting the patriarchal paradigms. She rewrites the cultural
scripts with regard to sexuality by recreating Virgin Mary, the foundational image of women’s sexual purity. Clifton’s reimagining of Mary as simultaneously religious and sensuous is a subversion of the hierarchically ordered binary logic that subordinates body to the mind and associates man with mind and woman with body.

Anne Sexton, Kamala Das, Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy and Lucille Clifton have rewritten the “book of myths/in which/ [women’s] names do not appear” (Rich, Gelpi, 1975:53). This rewriting has been vigorously pursued across cultures by women poets engaged in the quest for a medium of expression and a cultural identity. Within the mythical framework, they “express a general truth retaining the particularity of their experience” but “make of it, a general symbol” (Eliot, 1957:299). Myths are cultural and linguistic constructs that reinforce the ideology of male dominance. They stereotype women as “the second sex,” as “the Other,” as the “object.” Feminist re-vision of myths is an attempt to culturally rectify the misrepresentations of women and to “purify the language” of its sexist and racist bias. Irrespective of their culture, women poets have transformed myths into a poetic art and a poetic medium to faithfully represent female identity and female sexuality. Re-vision is the first step towards the development of a gynocentric language that is absolutely essential to delineate the female desire.

The five women poets, Anne Sexton, Kamala Das, Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy and Lucille Clifton belong to different cultures. But they attempt to subvert, revise and appropriate myths in identical ways to truly express female identity and female sexuality. They have adapted myth as an art as well as a medium to express their exclusively female experiences which have a collective
nature. Their re-visions are critiques of the androcentric culture and the phallogocentric language. In this regard, Helene Morales observes: “In telling myths from the woman’s point of view these writers lay claim to a different logos than misogynist writers do” (2007:98). Re-vision is a derivative discourse explored to counter the phallocentric discourse of mythology. By reconceptualising and reimagining the representation of women in myths and tales, they create a new language that accommodates woman, her concerns, apprehensions and aspirations.