Introduction

Patriarchy is sexual politics and a form of rule by force. Feminism is an oppositional practice or a counter politics that takes its origin from the oppressive and exploitative nature of male-female relations that affect women. Man-woman relationship in a patriarchal society is structured as an unequal power relation of domination and subordination whereby women are controlled by men. Though woman is defined and differentiated by her gender and sexuality, she is never free to express her desire and find an identity through that expression. Linguistic sexism restrains woman from articulating her self, identity and sexuality. Patriarchy uses the male-centred language as an instrument of subordination and controls female sexuality.

Androcentrism and patriarchy are closely related concepts. Patriarchy, the male world order, centralizes man and marginalizes woman. Masculine ways of thinking claim universality while the feminine ones are considered deviance. The androcentric value system has marginalised women as the white capitalist power structures have sidelined the coloured and the working classes. All institutions and signifying practices of patriarchal culture perceive everything, including women, from male perspective and reduce them to male terms. Feminist linguists posit that language in patriarchy is androcentric. Language constructs sexist reality and re-enforces sexist assumptions of the patriarchal society. One is born into a symbolic order which is phallocentric. All types of social interactions radiate androcentrism. It is through the acquisition of language that one becomes a social being. When one
learns the language of the patriarchal culture and puts it to use one accepts a set of values, beliefs and attitudes that favours man.

Every politics/ideology has its own strategies to perpetuate and maintain its social anchorage. Patriarchy also has a set of strategies to strengthen itself. Language is often used as an oblique form of politics to perpetuate male dominance in society. Myths and fairytales are linguistic constructs that propagate patriarchal ideology. Myths and tales created by patriarchy restrict the space available for women. Women are either silent or absent; their images are often distorted in these patriarchal constructs. So myths are endemically inimical to female identity. Images of women in myths and tales, constructed to gratify male interests, shape our thoughts and lives. In a patriarchy woman is forced to remain true to the image man has formulated for her. In order to avoid alienation, she struggles to fit into the male-constructed image. But she “feels rootless in the world expounded by man” (Chernin, 1987: xxvi). Woman’s socialization to the patriarchal value system is a turbulent process. So woman’s quest for identity is problematic in a patriarchal society.

The sexual politics in language used for practical discourse is not immediately explicit. But a woman writer finds this language inadequate to express or define herself. Language that is androcentric in conception and phallocentric in signification is an inadequate medium for women to articulate their distinctly female experiences. Language that defines woman by her gender cripples the woman writer. Patriarchal norms with regard to female creativity impart the message that “a woman has to overcome her sex to
Patriarchal discourses that categorize man’s experience as universal and woman’s experience as trivial instill in the woman writer a sense of marginality while rendering her subjective experiences. So she fails to create a meaningful impact on the world. In the absence of a female-centred language female writers are forced to use the male-centred language for literary composition. Women writers’ use of the androcentric language resembles a colonial situation in which the colonized use the language of the colonizer. Women writers’ use of the male-centred language is a sign of their approval of their marginalization or their silent submission to the “phallic imperialism” (Ruthven, 1984:30). So it becomes inevitable for women to evolve a new language for self definition: a language which is equally useful but opposite in perspective.

Re-vision of myths is a political attempt to erase the misrepresentation of female identity and female sexuality in myths and fairytales. It is also an attempt to expurgate the culture by removing elements which are hostile to female identity. As myth is a form of metalanguage, re-vision also helps to develop new collateral meanings to the myths, the meanings of which are shared by the society. Contemporary women poets have been viewed as “thieves of language” consciously involved in the project of evolving a gynocentric language through re-visionist mythmaking. This study Re-vision as Art and Medium: A Study of Re-visionist Mythmaking in Feminist English Poetry emanates from an increasing awareness of the relevance of the Promethean image of theft alluded to the material medium of writing called language. The theoretical space of the study is developed on the basic Poststructuralist tenets that interrogate the vital relation between gender and
language on the one hand and language and sexuality on the other. Mythic re-
vision by feminist poets is viewed as a trans-Atlantic practice in which women
poets domesticate the male-centred language to articulate female consciousness.
This study revolves round the kind of mythmaking practiced by five twentieth
century women poets from different cultures: Anne Sexton, the celebrated
confessional poet of America, Kamala Das, the poet laureate of Indian housewives,
Margaret Atwood, the internationally acclaimed poet of Canada, Carol Ann Duffy,
the first woman poet Laureate of England, and Lucille Clifton, the powerful poetic
voice of Black America. This transcultural study explores the diverse ways in which
they subvert, revise and appropriate gendered identities latent in myths and
fairytales. Re-vision has been for them both a technique to acquire a writing space
and “an awakening of dead or sleeping consciousness” (Rich, 1975: 168). It is at
once an art and a medium to express the female identity retrieved from the
androcentric materials.

Anne Sexton writes in the confessional mode. Her poetry mainly
concentrates on her personal life. Her poems record her battles with mental illness,
sexual trauma and seamy side of domesticity. She has explored the dark recess of
her self and transferred the ugly, the painful and the morbid into her poetry. Though
Sexton’s poetry has emerged out of her misfortune, it is universally appealing.
Sexton’s construction of female subjectivity through re-vision is interrogated
mainly in the context of her anthology Transformations, a personalized poetic re-
vision of Grimms’ Fairy Tales.
For Kamala Das, poetry is the medium to explore the modern Indian female psyche. A voice of protest from the feminist perspective reverberates through most of her writings. Her poetry has been a search for true love and true female identity. Conservative Indian culture prohibits her from explicitly expressing her sexuality. Radha-Krishna myth provides her with a frame to defamiliarize her self and a context to explicitly express her sexuality.

Margaret Atwood has distinguished herself in the exploration of women's issues. She is a prolific and multifaceted writer whose poetry has been inspired by myths and fairytales. *Power Politics* is Atwood’s most popular volume that earned her the reputation of an aggressive feminist writer. In her poems and fictions Atwood actively engages with Greek mythology, the most powerful discourse that supports patriarchy. In her re-visionist poems the female archetypes reject their traditional roles and powerfully articulate distinct female experiences, especially their experiences of language and sexuality.

Lucille Clifton uses poetry as a medium to voice the Black American female experience. She focuses on the ignored or suppressed aspects like sexual abuse that ultimately reduces Black women to the chattel of European masters. Clifton focuses on the White man's role in her calculated degradation and mistreatment as a sex object and labourer. She traces a pattern of sexual domination and violence in the male-female relationships. Myths and stereotypes associated with African-American women have played a pivotal role in disempowering them. Cultural assumptions based on these images are responsible for “African American-women’s limited access to societal resources and institutions” (Jewel, 1993:12). Clifton
transcends the limitations of gender and race by articulating her defamiliarized self in her poetry. Her poetic art is explored in the light of her re-vision of the Bible which, according to her, is the main source of oppression of all kinds.

Carol Ann Duffy is one of Britain's best known and most admired poets. Her poetic activism aims at erasing gender difference at every aspect of culture. Duffy deconstructs myths and legends which limit the space for women’s mobility. Duffy’s greatest achievement as a re-visionist poet is her interrogation of great men in *The World’s Wife*. She resurrects the wives of legendary heroes and historical personages and gives them voice to articulate the psychological maltreatment meted out to them by the men, they loved and the world respected. She illustrates that woman’s destiny is to suppress her desire and to be an object of male desire only to be victimized by male arrogance and indifference.

The first chapter of the thesis, “Language and Gender,” interrogates language as the primary cause of woman’s oppression. The Structuralist view that meanings are attributed arbitrarily to things by convention perceives “woman” as an unmotivated signifier that derives its signified from the patriarchal context. Language constructs gender by the binary opposition man/woman and plays an instrumental role in establishing and maintaining male hegemony. Gender identity is based on the constructs of male and female in the system of signification. Structuralism posits that language preexists the speaker/text and that language can mediate only culturally evolved signs. The speaker cannot alter the system that preexists him/her. Conceptualization of gender as at once culturally and linguistically constructed necessitates an enquiry into the patriarchal system of
values. Linguistic sexism is explicit in the representation of woman in male-constructed literary texts. Misrepresentation of woman in male-authored texts is the result of the androcentric bias of the male literary canon. Women are paradigmatically represented by absence or silence in literary histories. Ideological constraints of culture manifested in the literary expression of female consciousness are evidenced by the elements of negation and isolation in women’s literature.

The relation between language and sexuality is an extension of the relation between language and gender. Sexuality and gender are interrelated cultural constructs that also constitute the cultural identity. The interplay between femininity and sexuality is defined by the cultural context of the society. The second chapter, “Language and Sexuality,” explains how the female sexuality as a performance is textually constructed in the androcentric language. Linguistic construction of female sexuality is problematic since female desire and female sexuality are restricted and suppressed in androcentric cultures. This chapter is an attempt to provide critical insights into conceptions of language and sexuality which not only illuminate but also problematise each other. Culturally constructed femininity involves the inability to distinguish between fact and façade and requires women to let their body serve as passive site for male hegemony, both sexual and cultural. In a patriarchy a woman’s body is a space where male oppression is inscribed. Role of language in mediating the culturally scripted sexuality is the focus of the chapter. The dynamics of domination/subordination within sexuality is assimilated into the individual’s self through social interactions and androcentric writings. The representation of the erotic in art is a manifestation of the patriarchal assumption
that female sexuality seeks fulfilment in male sexuality. Women’s poetic voices, which bring out their interiority, illustrate that the male dominated language alienates women from their texts as well as their bodies.

The raw material for gynocentric language is conventional language/metalanguage. The female identity submerged in conventional language can be retrieved and represented through re-visionist mythmaking. The third chapter, “Re-visionist Mythmaking,” introduces myths and fairytales as “foundations of collective male fantasy” that attune women to a sexuality programmed in a male libidinal economy (Ostriker, 1986:317). The androcentric myths are so powerful that they silence women and overshadow their identities. Woman is either silenced or misrepresented in male-centred texts. Female identity is circumscribed within a narrow frame in myths, fairytales and histories. Woman has only a gendered existence, serving gender roles: daughter, mother, wife, lover and so on. Mythical narratives conform to the dynamics of domination/subordination with regard to gender and sexuality. Patriarchal culture that celebrates passivity, receptiveness, beauty and helplessness in women undermines any possibility of woman having an individualized identity. The angel/whore dichotomy is a linguistic homogenization that limits the wide spectrum of female identity. The mythical stereotyping of women in terms of the dichotomous labels of Angel/Whore or Mary/Eve is uncomfortable for women. Images of women in myths and tales evolve out of the male fears and fantasies of the female. Sexual violence represented in classical myths and their modern retelling rationalizes the male fancy that women enjoy being violated. In this regard, the Greek historian Herodotus’s comment on Europa
myth is remarkable: “…it is obvious that if women hadn’t wanted it, they would not have been abducted” (Morales, 2007: 87-88). Re-visioning the myths to reflect the contemporary reality serves to evolve a female centred language on the one hand and to expurgate the myths of elements inimical to female identity on the other. The chapter also investigates the literary technique of re-visionist mythmaking.

The aesthetics of re-visionist mythmaking can be discussed at two levels: as a poetic technique and as a medium of expression of the female self. Poetry is the metalanguage of a high culture where women have been traditionally “scribblers.” The notions of the poet as the transcendental speaker of a unified culture and the dependent and oppressed state of women within the culture continue to remain in poetry. Women’s writing is often considered a surrogate female body or female body aestheticised as art. Women’s poetry is often the representation of the history of collective oppression. As a construct of oppression, it is a literature of necessity, a requisite for survival. Most of the women’s writings are subjective, autobiographical and confessional. So the protagonists/speakers are often misidentified with the poets. This rules out the possibility of distancing or displacement of emotions which is essential for objectivity or impersonality. As the fortunes of a text counts on its objectivity, female writers run the risk of being coldly received or instantly forgotten. So they have to render the subjective content of their expressions into an objective form. For this the women writers take to the mystification of the literary process. They try to distance themselves from the suffering protagonists and thus create an impression of impersonality. The writer creates a narrative mask to differentiate
herself from the female protagonist and to maintain the aesthetic distance. Re-
visionist mythmaking provides them a context to mystify and defamiliarize the self.
The fourth Chapter, “Defamiliarizing the Self: Re-vision as Art” examines re-
visionist mythmaking as a form of objective artistry in the poems of the select poets.

According to Barthes, the two semiological systems, language and myth
have a staggered relation to one another. Myth is a form of metalanguage. This
means that language is the language-object for myth. Both Barthes and
Levi-Strauss argue that there is hardly any difference between language and
metalanguage: culturally and structurally they are identical. Myth that builds its
own system based on language is phallogocentric in signification. So myth denies
Subject position to women. Women writers find a way into the phallus-centred
Symbolic by subverting the myth. Myths and fairytales are hegemonic discourses
and re-vision is a feminist counter-discourse. Women poets re-map and re-name
their identity by deconstructing “the meanings of male and female …reserved in the
sanctuaries of existing language” (Ostriker, 1986:211). This is the critical focus of
the fifth chapter “Articulating the Female: Re-vision as Medium.” This chapter
explores the diverse ways in which the select poets subvert, revise and appropriate
gendered identities locked within fairytales and myths, creating a Subject position
for women.

Anne Sexton, Kamala Das and Lucille Clifton are strong voices of
confessional poetry. They write fervently about the strengths and frailties of
feminist confession. Margaret Atwood and Carol Ann Duffy unravel the male-
centred histories/legends to speak of the silence and absence of women in
patriarchal culture. In spite of the differences in cultural milieus, these women poets use re-visionist mythmaking as a literary technique to bring in objectivity by defamiliarizing the poetic self. All these poets realize the inherent power of myths and tales and retell them to create a favourable landscape for women. These poets appropriate for women a speaking position in the phallus-centred system of signification. They are different in their ethnic and national identities. But irrespective of their differences, these women poets share the collective experiences of oppression and respond identically to the patriarchal tactics of subordinating women in and through language.